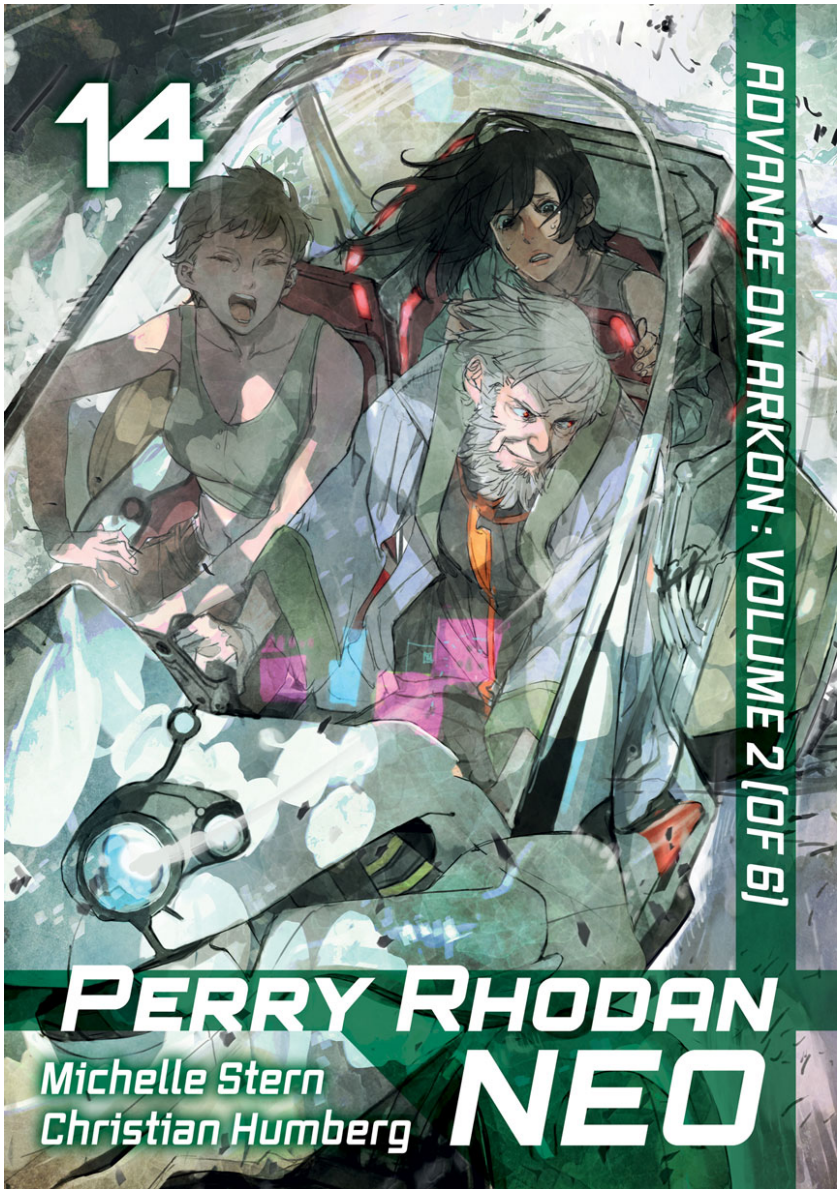
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ADVANCE ON ARKON : VOLUME 2 (OF 6)
PERRY RHODAN NEO
Michelle Stern
Christian Humberg

Perry Rhodan NEO: Volume 14 [Complete]

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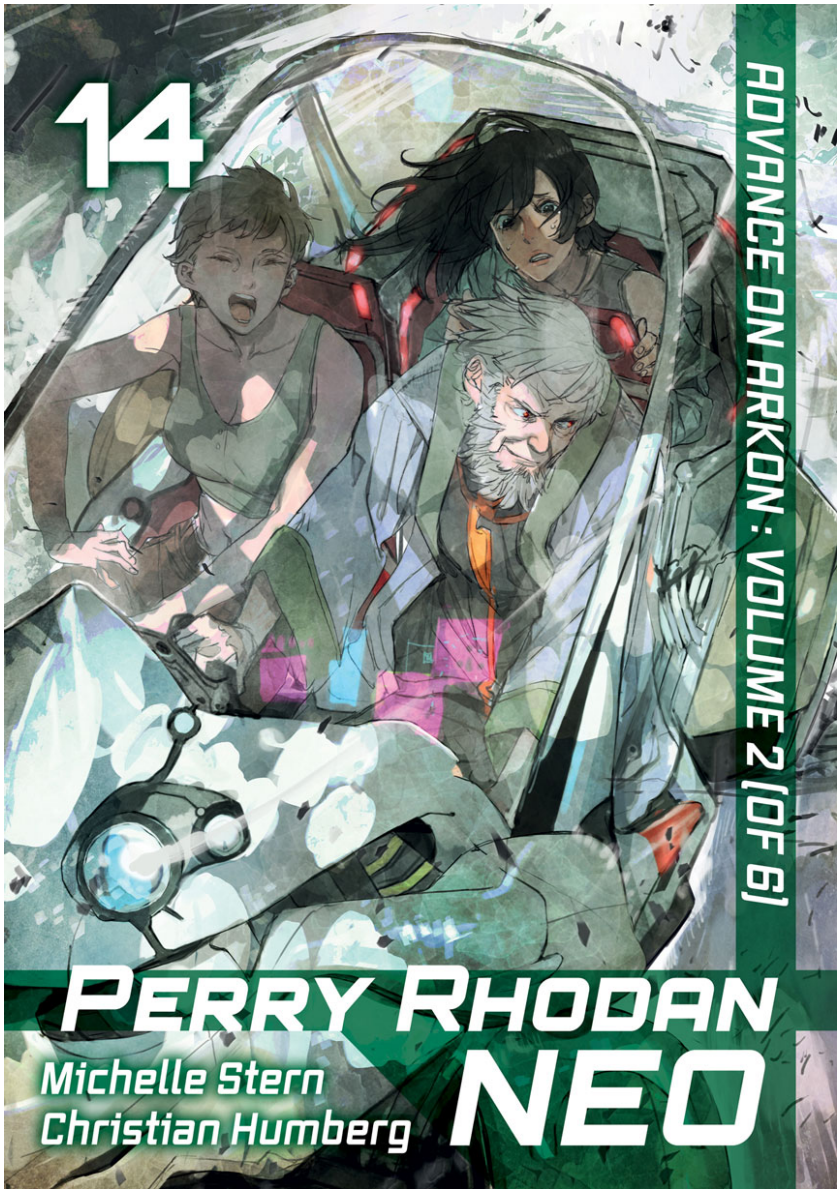
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Episode 27: The Web

by Michelle Stern

> “Ixik, sa tuslon, saigez haldor.”
>
> “Listen, my brother, the stars are calling us.”
>
> Mehandor

1.

Perry Rhodan

January 2, 2037

Far Away From Home

The stars flickered in the holo, as if they couldn't decide whether to stay on or go out forever. Light and darkness quarreled with each other. Rhodan clung to the back of his chair. A knife seemed to stab his cervical vertebrae; his neck burned as if under blows.

As suddenly as it had flared up, the pain disappeared.

"New damage to the transition engine!" shouted Thora next to him. The Arkonide had recovered faster than he had; for the experienced spaceship commander, the pain of equalization had to be familiar.

Shivering, Rhodan wiped the sweat from his skin and tightened his shoulders. *Can you ever get used to an invisible blade being driven into your neck?*

He leaned back, looked at the numerous holographs that lay horseshoe-shaped around Thora, enclosing them like a wall of light. More images and status messages lit up at the command post. The colorations showed a good two dozen system failures. The positronics were overloaded and had to be supported manually. There was no acoustic information, only the shrill howl of a siren, as if it were coming from everywhere at the same time.

Rhodan didn't need a second glance to realize that the *Tosoma* had turned into a wreck. Due to the renewed transition, there were numerous additional damage indicators, which pushed themselves into the foreground with rhythmic flashing. Obviously, this time, the outer spherical shell had been especially affected. The remaining parts of the armored shell made of Arkon steel were perforated as after a space battle, and the ring of the spaceship had

several dents and notches. A segment had been shredded out of the ship, as if the teeth of a moon-sized space giant had dug into it. They would have to blow that part off.

Images of the last minutes before the jump raced through Rhodan's memory in a split second. He, Thora, and Bull had fished five hundred people out of space with tractor beams after the crew members had been sucked out through an opening. Within seconds, they were able to rescue all those who weren't wearing spacesuits.

The reason for the maneuver and the subsequent detonation had been the devastating nuclear fire, triggered by an Arkon bomb, which no one had even known was on board. Rhodan thought he could still perceive the stench that had emanated from the burning walls. If Thora had not blown off the affected region, the entire crew would already be dead.

He forced himself to leave the memories behind. The present offered new challenges. Even though the gravity of the inner sphere had stabilized, it was high time to take care of the latest damage. With rapid movements, he touched the buttons of the control panel on his console to bring up more holoelements. Within an instant, Thora's depictions surrounded him. According to the color scheme, each damage report seemed to be the top priority due to the incorrectly working positronics.

Rhodan reached for the life support data with steady hands and zoomed in with his thumb and forefinger. In a few seconds, ten units would fail and the systems would finally collapse. The control center would no longer be supplied by energy and oxygen. Then he would feel like he was back in a hell he had only recently left after the second and devastating misjump of the *Tosoma*.

"Positronics, redirect energy to life support systems! Deactivate the remaining impulse engines to free up more energy!" *As long as we're floating like space debris, we won't need them. Breathing air and maintaining pressure take precedence.*

"New fires due to aggregate failure in four outer sections!" said Thora. "Extinguishing work has been initiated!"

A curse sounded beside them. “Damn, who knocked me down? My neck feels like someone couldn’t keep their hands off the stun gun!”

Rhodan ignored Bull’s comment. His eyes widened as he stared at an iridescent yellow display with bated breath, the horror leaving him speechless. The fusion reactors were on the verge of overload. Would the ship turn into a ball of embers? Ten thousand years at the bottom of the Atlantic did not pass without a trace even on an Arkonide spaceship. In new condition, the damage could have been repaired quickly and the right steps would have been taken. However, the Positronic was reacting agonizingly slowly.

Fortunately, the dangerous readouts were decreasing. Rhodan squeezed the air out of his lungs and devoted himself to another problem. “How many wounded?” he asked Thora.

“Another hundred, at least. The synchronization of the transition did not succeed exactly. Circulatory problems and cramps are the result. Primary medical care is on the way.”

In the data, Rhodan saw the number of crew members. The rescue of those trapped in the hangar had been a complete success. They hadn’t had to leave anyone behind in space, and the injuries were limited. Presumably, there would be no permanent damage. At least that was a ray of hope. He was not allowed to think about the twelve people who had died directly or as a result of the first failed transition, otherwise grief and horror would overwhelm him. He knew their names and had shaken hands with each of them when they had come on board.

“Life support systems are in place!” exclaimed Thora. She blinked away tears of excitement.

Around them, the unnerving wail of the siren died out. Silence fell.

It wasn’t until that moment that Rhodan noticed his heart racing. It pounded in his chest as if to compensate for the lack of activity from the positronics. Drops of sweat adorned his forehead. Nevertheless, he felt physically much better than after the first

transition.

“Basic mode is stabilizing,” he said to Thora, but also to Bull and the other crew members on the bridge.

Many of them regained consciousness at that moment, moaning and cursing. The pain of equalization had knocked them out. A medical robot took care of John Marshall, who was still unconscious, and gave him an injection. A mechanic vomited. Bull had stood up and was taking care of the whimpering and writhing Kakuta, who had been lying on a makeshift couch before the transition. The efforts of the many teleportation jumps to rescue those who were trapped had left their mark on him. His pale skin looked stretched over his bones. Two steps away, Gucky was lying on a similar stretcher. The mousebeaver did not move; he appeared to be unconscious.

Rhodan looked from him to Sloane, who bent over Gucky to check on him. *Despite the mutants, we needed a cook to save most of the people who were trapped. He had the idea to pull them back into the ship with the tractor beam. If Rhino wants my apartment in the Stardust Tower, let it be given to him on a silver platter.*

On the large holo under the bridge ceiling, the image of the stars changed, finally extinguished to make room for blackness.

“Restoration of optics expected in three minutes,” Thora informed everyone. Her movements were breathtakingly fast, but Rhodan didn’t have time to watch her. He was busy manually activating additional extinguishing robots to send them to the main fire region. He then channeled medical assistance for the crew and, with the help of the positronics, outlined the possibilities of support and first aid. The on-board resources were sufficient, albeit barely.

“Locating possible in four minutes!” interjected Crest. The old Arkonide jumped up and helped Bull move an unconscious engineer into a stable position.

Several moments passed in tense silence. Around him, Rhodan heard the central crew resume their work. Little by little, the men and women managed to become masters of the chaos.

We can do it, he thought. *We stopped the nuclear fire and escaped. We will also master this situation.*

The emergency lighting gave way to the light of several wreath-shaped spotlights, whose bright glow dazzled Rhodan. He blinked, grabbed the switching elements, and established an acoustic connection to the crew. “This is Perry Rhodan speaking. The nuclear fire has been stopped; the crew is safely on board. We didn’t have to leave anyone behind.”

Shaky laughter and enthusiastic shouts came from the center. Rhodan suspected that his words caused relief throughout the ship.

“We owe this success to one man in particular: Michelin-Star chef Rinat Ugolyev, known to many of you as Rhino. Thank you, Rhino! I don’t just speak for myself when I say you deserve more than one medal.” He paused for a moment. “More help is on the way. Please stay calm and follow the instructions of the crew. I’ll get back to you.”

Thora turned to him, her face emaciated from the effort she had overcome. Her red eyes narrowed, the tension in her features betraying new worries. “We have a location. Due to the failed transition, the positronics independently headed to these coordinates.”

Before Rhodan could ask why Thora obviously disliked the arbitrariness of the positronics, a hologram appeared next to the command post. It showed a razor-sharp three-dimensional image. He turned his chair to the holo. The attention of all those present was also diverted there.

In the middle of the solitude of space lay a silvery structure with numerous outstretched arms that gripped like tentacles. The holo showed several sets of data in parallel. Was it a spaceship?

“Wow!” said Bull. “An octopus of steel!”

Rhodan heard several people inhale sharply. He, too, was in danger of losing his breath.

Sloane stepped closer and reached out to the holo. Her finger touched the bright light. “This is...breathtaking. So unreal. As if from a crazy dream.”

Rhodan stared at the construct in fascination. A circular object with a high albedo had just emerged from beneath it. A planet. White craters traversed a bright surface. What he had initially thought was a spaceship turned out to be a space station of gigantic proportions, based on the data shown. The central unit consisted of a ship that was a good seven times as long as the largest human object in space. On its top were several towerlike pillars, a platform at least twice as long with a transparent roof, which spread out in front of them like a game board with tiny buildings and glasslike sculptures. Foreign plants proliferated on it, embedded in a complicated system of watercourses. Some seemed to glow from within. At the same time, the transparent roof emitted a glitter and sparkle, as if a polished diamond the size of a small town were floating in the room. At the edges, the colorful iridescence irritated the eyes and made the entire structure shimmer like a mirage.

The station was in the geostationary orbit of an ice world. A distant double sun provided orange-golden light like a spotlight. The paler blue glow of the smaller star could not prevail against the radiance of the supergiant at its side. The brightness was so extreme that the positronics had automatically dimmed it. According to the displays, the sun had a hundred times the luminosity of Sol.

Beta Albireo, Rhodan realized. His neck felt constricted. *In the constellation Swan. About 320 light years from Earth.* He didn’t know what impressed him more: the unimaginable distance from his home or the glittering space station in front of him, which lay like an oasis in the desert of space and had to assert itself in nothingness among the stars.

“A diamond garden in space,” Reg said into the reverent silence. “On the back of a steel octopus. I’m going crazy.”

Curious, Rhodan’s eyes glided over the construction. Numerous extensions jutted out and off the central unit. It was a conglomerate of cylindrical ships, each spaced at right angles. Some flashed as if strewn with sparks of fire, others appeared dark and spongy, as if a

field of ashen-gray light lay around them. Miles of tunnels and supply lines stretched out into space. They stood out brightly from the blackness of the background. Spaceships of various sizes, shapes and colors docked at some of them. In addition to two colorful spherical ships, there were three monochrome cylindrical craft and a black patterned disc-shaped one; on the opposite side, an ellipsoidal vessel detached itself from its position next to a small cube in shiny gold. Numerous other ships gave the overall structure its changeable shape. Most of them were obviously unarmed freighters.

It was the first time that Rhodan could see at a glance how many civilizations in the galaxy were hidden from his eyes. A revelation. The ships were as different as their builders, and each one seemed to say, “Look, Perry Rhodan, the universe is great and humanity is just a tiny grain of sand on the beach of the star ocean.”

“What’s that?” whispered Kakuta, who had recovered enough to stay on his feet without help, albeit shakily.

“*Ke-Matlon*,” Crest replied. “A staging station for transition spaceships. Wait a minute, we received a data packet via transmission. I’ll relay it to a visual display.”

Rhodan watched in fascination as data in a foreign language appeared beneath the structure and was translated into Arkonide and English within seconds. Several information records flared up. One of them revealed that the inhabitants called the structure “the Web.” The ice world was Gedt-Kemar.

“Snowman,” Reg said with a grin. “If you look down at Gedt-Kemar, you can see a snowman in the outline of the continent. We should save the planet in the database with that image.”

Crest nodded good-naturedly. “As you wish.”

Rhodan smiled. “The station has a shipyard. That’s why the positronics sent us off course. We couldn’t have headed to a better place.”

Thora crossed her arms in front of her chest. “You think so? I’m

afraid—”

“Incoming transmission!” interrupted Crest. He looked at Rhodan. “The data package contains an update that is compatible with our translators. I’ll transfer the Mehandor commercial language to the implanted chip. It’s called Intercosmo.”

“Accept!” Thora commanded. She stood up, wiping her face to dry the last tears.

The image of *Ke-Matlon* disappeared. The holo now showed a woman who stood seamlessly in the room. She wore white attire with lime-green accents. To Rhodan, she looked like a wiry lady of petite stature in her late fifties. Short red hair made her resemble Bull, and she was slightly smaller than Thora. She wore demure makeup. At the top of one ear sat a flashing diamond clamp, from which dangled three thin silver threads.

“This is matriarch Belinkhar speaking from the Nham clan. Your ship does not have a valid identifier. Please identify yourself and state your request.” For such a petite woman, her voice sounded surprisingly deep. With a keen eye, she stared at Thora. Her green eyes looked curiously around the bridge before her gaze wandered back to her fellow Arkonide. She lacked any trace of the dazed mental state of Arkonide gambling addicts and seemed to have both feet on the ground; her proud attitude was in no way inferior to Thora’s.

With her chin raised, Thora took a step farther into the detection field. “My name is Tiara da Intral. We jumped to this position through a failed transition and do not intend to jeopardize the neutrality of the Web.”

The matriarch raised an eyebrow. “Your words to the ears of the Regent, Arkonide. If you fly on, you are allowed to pass.” She surveyed Thora from top to bottom. “Your ship has seen better times. If you want to make use of repairs or medical care, let Haklui Sarkatz instruct you in Sector C. I await your decision within the next three Arkon hours. After that, your residence permit in our clan area expires.”

Thora and Crest exchanged a look that Rhodan could not interpret. He saw a deep crease on Thora's forehead that hadn't been there before.

"Thank you, Matriarch Belinkhar. That's very generous."

The image of the matriarch vanished. Rhodan leaned forward in his chair.

"Tiara da Intral? Why did you give a false name?"

Contrary to her otherwise very inquisitive nature, Thora lowered her gaze. "For security reasons. We are not among friends."

Bull rolled his eyes behind Thora, a facial expression that showed Rhodan he had received new reason for his fears. Thora and Crest had kept a low profile from the beginning of the planning of their advance to Arkon. So far, Rhodan had accepted it, as he owed a lot to the two Arkonides. But he was slowly coming up to a border whose barbed wire fences were conspicuous with mistrust.

"Your fears seem unfounded to me, Thora. This matriarch may have a tendency to mock, but she seems to me like a person to talk to."

"Make no mistake. They are Mehandor."

"And?"

"There has always been a saying on Arkon. Translated, it means: 'Only a fool deals with the Mehandor.'"

"You don't think we should head for the station?"

"Not if we have a choice. We..."

An explosion shook the *Tosoma*. Thora turned around to the holobatteries above her console. "Controls!" she ordered.

The positronics implemented the requirement within a fraction of a second, and other virtual elements appeared before them. Thora pursed her lips and shook her head.

“We have no choice. The explosion damaged at least three of the structure field converters. We are no longer capable of faster-than-light travel.”

Rhodan looked at the hologram, which floated freely in space like a ghostly apparition. The Web seemed like a miracle to him, even if it meant further difficulties.

“Let’s dock.”

“Watlon ulop jantarka kantanlon, sa nanlon, ulop suktorka loklon.”

“Life is poisonous sweetness, my son, is bitter beauty.”

Mehandor

2.

Levtan

The Intoxication of Kan'or

Levtan lay naked on the outer wall of his apartment block. His fingers slid over Izkat's patterned belly, along the fold below the navel. With wide eyes, he stared out into the blackness between Gedt-Kemar and the distant double sun. Warmth pulsed through him, making the moment sublime and giving him the certainty of being more than the fourth son of an unattainably successful father. He felt light, not only because of the lower gravity of the grav field of his outdoor unit, but also from the intoxicating effect of the Kan'or, which made him content with himself despite his melancholy thoughts. With Kan'or, his life on *Ke-Matlon* was beautiful; even the most depressed mood turned into good-natured darkness, kind and familiar like his own sleep refuge.

"...suktorka loklu-u...," Simtan's smoky voice sounded over the couch. The song made Levtan melancholic—the ballad of a father who loved his children and gave them instructions on their way. His father had also loved him before Levtan had made the fatal mistake of stealing from an Arkonide and letting himself be caught by the Haklui forces. It had become the beginning of a long descent. Would his life have been different had he resisted the temptation back then? Would he have walked through the tunnel of honor like a beaming Janraklui winner instead of scratching the wall from the outside?

Over and past, like a meteorite passing by without leaving a trace. He felt Izkat's heated skin against his. They had just loved each other in the golden light of the suns, protected from curious roommates by the force fields. It had been glorious, had been kan'or sex; violent and honest, loud enough to drown out the music. As if they had to shout out that they were there, filled with irrepressible lust. Their greedy breathing during the act had caused the oxygen saturation to decrease as they liked it. The thinner the air, the more intense the orgasm. The standard level had still not quite been

reached, but Levtan saw no reason to correct the system.

The Kan'or pulsed through him. He enjoyed the sensation of having a consciousness detached from the body. A floating camera above his head, provided with a colorful lens that looked into the world for him.

For a while, they lay silently on the soft ground until Izkat became restless and pushed his hand off her body. She grabbed a nail-sized adhesive oval, studded with fine hairpins, and pressed it onto the inside of her thigh. A smile appeared on her face; she sighed pleasantly and began to pant. Her muscles relaxed and let her sink like a sack deeper into the yielding ground.

"How was it on the *Arina*?" asked Levtan. He believed that he had to say something, that he could not enjoy the silence and light-heartedness for too long because it could give Izkat the feeling that he did not value her company after sex.

"Wunnerful," she said drunkenly. A grin split her face. "You're crazy, the Arkoni...that's true. But the ship is a dream. And they're generous. Do you know that they pay ten thousand Chronnors when special colonists are delivered?"

"Ten thousand?" Levtan imagined the Chronnor units at his virtual resort. He reached for an adhesive pad next to him. "We could buy Kan'or as far as the Sun Barge."

She laughed softly and turned to him. There was ridicule on her face. Her moss-green eyes pinned him to the ground with their gaze. "So, you'd share with me, wouldn't you?"

Levtan's cheeks burned. No. He wouldn't. Neither would she with him. They might share their bodies, but it had nothing to do with love or obligation, rather familiarity and the feeling of emptiness, as far as the distance to Gedt-Kemar, which they both liked to forget for a few moments.

The silence became oppressive. Levtan heard Izkat's breathing calm down. The initial fogging and tongue-paralyzing effect of the Kan'or abruptly diminished. This was followed by the feeling of

floating through the tunnels, detached from gravity.

“Don’t you want to join the next tour?” Izkat changed the subject. “We still have a place available on the *Estator*. You could get some Chronnors. See for yourself how crazy the white hairs are.”

“No.” The answer came quickly. Levtan had never left the Web. Not that he wasn’t drawn to the vastness of the stars. Secretly, he longed for space travel, as the strangers celebrated it. A pull seemed to grope for him like invisible fingers that wanted to grab him and take him with them somewhere promises waited. But the fear of the unknown was greater...and the worry of not getting his next dose of Kan’or in time on a foreign ship, or being caught. Although the Arkonides themselves were addicts who did not enter an access platform without their fictional games in their luggage, they cracked down on drug abuse.

“Coward.” Izkat turned away.

The word was like a blow. Shame rose in Levtan, but at the same time, he was angry. He was tired of being judged by others because he did not conform to what they saw in him or did not comply with their wishes.

“As if you were selfless. You’re not talking about me, Kata. You’re afraid to go on a new ship alone.”

She half lowered her eyelids but did not deny his accusation. “I need Kan’or first...” She stopped and sat up. From one moment to the next, she seemed wide awake. “What’s that?”

Levtan followed her gaze. A spacecraft approached Sector C and maneuvered towards position five. “A spherical ship. Arkon construction. Nothing special.”

“Look closer.” She sounded stern, annoyed, like his mother when he had returned after the study sessions and his meager daily score was displayed on the clan holo. His brother Darun had looked down sadly with a gesture of helplessness because Levtan’s ratings had been so miserable that even Darun’s brilliant performances could

not bring the overall rating of the six siblings out of their hole.

Finally push the past away. You have grown old, Lev; hold on to the eternal yesterday like a log caught in a stream.

“The ship is older than our central unit,” Izkat claimed.

“Nonsense. Lie down again; I want to hear Simtan.” Soon came his favorite song.

Izkat let herself sink back into the soft disguise. “I know what I see, Levtan. Such a ship has never arrived. An unknown crew. Maybe that’s good for us.”

“Maybe,” said Levtan, hoping that she would finally rest. But as he knew Izkat, she wouldn’t. When Izkat sensed prey, she could not be dissuaded. He looked into her eyes and knew she was making plans.

“Da ikonnos li simamlon, haka ulop jai bulka.”

“If you don’t know your clan, what else can be holy to you?”

Mehandor

3.

Belinkhar

The Shadow

Belinkhar watched from the bridge on Extension Eight as the damaged *Tosoma* flew towards its docking site. Several kilometers in front of the steel glass window, seemingly close enough to touch, the Arkonide ship floated by, occasionally drifting off course. It gave the matriarch the impression of a grazing animal.

Inwardly, she counted backwards. *Three, two, one...*

"What are you thinking?" Etztak scolded her. He stood bent over, as if artificial gravity were pulling his massive body not only downward, but also forward. His face was a mask of indignation, his foot twitching in his expensive Sar shoe. He was about to stomp to intensify his protest.

And zero. As reliable as oxygen regulation, the matriarch thought sarcastically and turned to her "shadow."

"What am I thinking?" she asked, although she knew exactly what Etztak meant.

"Revise your decision, Belinkhar!" He pointed his index finger accusingly at the *Tosoma*. "This ship will only cause us trouble. It will violate our neutrality. Think of the clan!"

"I always think of the clan, Etztak." Belinkhar looked at the ship, which had now reached its parking position and was surrounded by huge brackets within the force field, brought to its final spot for the time being. "And I don't see a warship down there, but a wreck. The *Tosoma* is badly damaged; there is a lack of survivable space on board. Should we leave them to fend for themselves? That means abandoning them to death. The sensor results leave no room for doubt. The superluminal drive has failed; the crew can no longer reach any planet. What would happen to our reputation if it was

said that the Nham clan was suffocating helpless people in space? We have a moral obligation, Etztak, and I intend to comply with it. Anything else is unacceptable."

Etztak walked excitedly up and down beside her, his lower jaw grinding. The more nervous and hectic he became, the calmer Belinkhar felt. Etztak touched his trimmed beard resolutely.

"The ship has no valid identification. Something is rotten there. This type has not been built for several thousand years. Perhaps it was stolen from a space graveyard. When the Regent learns..." Etztak stopped abruptly. His gaze went nowhere; his voice became a whisper. "The Regent never forgives."

Belinkhar turned to him. "Calm down. Space is big. The regent doesn't have to notice. You are right about one thing: there is a mystery surrounding this ship. For me, the invalid identifier is just a reason to help. I want to know what's behind it. What is behind the appearance of this Tiara da Intral and her crew? You have seen the images of the optics and the transmitted crew data. For Arkonides, these crew members are unusual. Except for the commander and the Derengar, the old scientist, they seem strange. I don't know which colony they are supposed to come from. Perhaps we can profit from the situation, or the knowledge will prove to be of great value elsewhere."

"This is a dangerous game, Belinkhar. If someone talks..."

Her eyes narrowed. She felt a scratch in her throat, as if fine needles were scraping over it. Not for the first time, she wished to be allowed to ban Etztak from speaking. Unfortunately, he was her shadow—he had not only the right, but the duty, to question her decisions.

"Who shall betray us, Etztak? Do you no longer trust your own clan? Your loyalty is beyond doubt, isn't it?"

He was silent at last. But Belinkhar knew it was just the calm before the storm. She saw it in the all-too-familiar way that he rounded his back and pressed his arms to his torso. Her shadow sank into himself, gathering strength to break out again.

He turned with a triple step in a semicircle, his eyes darting to the right and left, as if looking for support. There was none. They stood alone in the control room on the bridge.

“This ship must be turned away,” he insisted. “It’s an unknown quantity. We must prioritize safety, not gut feeling. Only if we send it away will we have acted wisely. Follow this assessment, matriarch, before there is much damage to the Web.”

Belinkhar understood his objections. The Empire has been unusually active on the outskirts in recent months. Something was going on that was already in the air but could not yet be grasped. Nevertheless, she did not want to give in. The *Tosoma* was a blessing. To send them away was to reject a great gift.

“We can eliminate the unknowns at any time, should the situation become critical,” Belinkhar replied adamantly.

Her shadow’s face changed color; his red beard stubble seemed to become paler as the blood rushed to his head. He raised his arms. His facial expressions clearly told Belinkhar what he was thinking. He considered her decision to be that of an irresponsible “Dekhinlu,” a young Mehandor who had to stick her nose into every ray of energy.

His voice became cutting. “Why head for a deadly grave vortex when the saving platform is right next door?”

“My decision has been made. The ship stays.”

“I insist that my protest be included in the Astars in the It of the Day Three Dasgae 8356.”

The words were an inevitable surrender. Etztak was the shadow, but she remained the matriarch. In the end, he was powerless, and the ominous glow in his eyes showed how dissatisfied he was once again with Esrad’s second daughter.

Although I am only ten years younger than him, he wants my sister back. The old, experienced leader. On impulse, she touched the leather skin of her cheek. *As if I haven’t grown old myself.*

“Your protest will be noted.” Belinkhar walked closer to the console and made a gesture programmed into the system with her hand, which connected to Section C. Haklui Sarkatz appeared on the holo. His beardless, ascetic face showed surprise at seeing Belinkhar personally in front of him. His brown eyes narrowed questioningly.

“Matriarch, what can I do for you?”

“Monitor the disembarkation of passengers from the newly docked ship. I hereby grant the crew full freedom of movement in the Web. They should take a look around *Ke-Matlon*. Tell Tiara da Intral that she and her crew are welcome to leave the ship. Grant the team ‘Hastlu.’ The first drink is on the station to welcome them. Everything else will be arranged.”

Next to her, Etztak leaned forward so far that it seemed like a miracle he did not slam his broad nose into the steel plate. “Matriarch, I protest vehemently against this order! We don’t know the strangers. Their legal status is unknown. What if they smuggle weapons onto the station? It is unreasonable to grant them such freedom!”

“This, too, will be included in the Astars in the It of the third Dasgae. Anything else, Etztak?”

Her shadow had closed his fingers like a pyramid into a fist; the bent middle finger protruded as a tip, as if he wanted to punch her stomach.

“No, matriarch.” He turned around and left the bridge. Surely, he would treat himself to a hot Savia at his favorite Mantan and come back after about two hours with an expressionless face to continue his service. He would make her feel that he was suspicious of her and that he missed her sister Gyrikh.

Belinkhar let him go. Her eyes searched for the docked ship. She had her reasons for being kind to the newcomers. A fine smile softened her features. Perhaps the *Tosoma* could offer the clan exactly what it so desperately needed.

“Imawot Te-Hankatlon, Sislon, za iwulkon kantanka Sainlon.”

“Live in the now, sister, where you breathe sweet air.”

Mehandor

4.

Tatiana Michalovna

In a Strange World

The springboard bounced under her feet once, then twice. Her toes tingled and she felt the vibrations travel up through her legs to her stomach. A hard push sent her up and back. The image below her dropped rhythmically, then shot up again. Fifty meters of nothing, then the white-blue surface, traversed by hard cracks. Adrenaline flowed through her; fear quickened her heartbeat.

Michalovna grabbed Crest's hand. They jumped off together, plunging headlong through velvety blackness towards Snowman's harsh ice ground.

She screamed and pressed Crest's fingers together. The Arkoinde had jumped a split second in front of her, his white-blond strands of hair tickling her cheek. It smelled salty and metallic, as if they were diving into a sea of cooling steel. The rush of free falling turned her cries into a euphoric howl and her mouth dried up. In her head, her thoughts were wiped away except for one: *I'm alive.*

The surface of the planet slammed into them. The blow came hard and suddenly. Stopped by an impact field, they hovered close over the holo that suggested Snowman's underground. An imaginary wall of snow surrounded them. They hung in the air, bellies forward, legs bent, arms outstretched.

A crater opened under them. Golden sparks danced on its bottom and rose towards them like soap bubbles.

Crest laughed. "I haven't done this in many decades. The pleasure containers of the Mehandor are priceless."

A soft ringing sounded and the holo disappeared. Among them, Sloane tilted her head back.

“I think so too,” the American remarked pointedly. “And someone will have to pay for your pleasures, Crest!”

Michalovna rolled her eyes, turning away from Sloane.

Is there actually a life for this woman before death or only one after death at God’s right-hand side?

She looked at Crest, whose laughter ended with a grin. It was good to see him so exuberant. His red eyes sparkled enterprisingly. His curious gaze didn’t want to match the deep lines that had been dug into his face over the years. Once again, it crossed her mind that he was old, but now seemed young in an unbelievable way.

Slowly, the Russian floated to the ground next to him with circular arm movements and walked towards the airlock leading into a section with Earthlike gravity. Crest followed her with the vigor of a competitive athlete.

They took an anti-grav lift down. From their perspective, they could not see the newly reactivated holo of Snowman. Instead, they had a direct view of the jumping platform fifty meters higher, which boasted two petite Mehandor girls with elaborate red braids.

Michalovna stopped to look at them. Colorful, high-necked combinations in simple gray emphasized their curves. They wore jewelry clips on their ears and in their braids. Their feet were adorned with unusual boots, too clunky to be fashionable by human standards. But almost everyone wore them on the Web. Crest had called them Sar shoes and explained that with lower gravity, they could pick up an automatically regulated magnetic bond to the bottom of the station.

Michalovna curiously put out her mental feelers. As soon as she had left the *Tosoma*, she had tried to see if she could read the minds of the Mehandor. She had succeeded without any problems.

She closed her eyes now, fine sweat beading on her forehead. The girls were excited, looking forward to the upcoming jump. At the same time, they were unsettled by the picture that presented themselves to them. Michalovna did not understand what exactly

deterred the two, but the act of jumping towards the simulated surface of Gedt-Kemar, of all things, caused horror in them and was considered a kind of test of courage.

"Can we go on?" asked Sloane. You could see clearly how superfluous she felt the stop was.

Crest touched her arm confidentially. "Aren't you having fun, Miss Sloane? We have time. We'll get to the garden platform quickly enough. It's not running away from us."

Sloane did not reply, but she seemed appeased. Michalovna grinned to herself. When Crest smiled happily, others found it hard to be disgruntled—even Sloane, who had been carrying a thick tank of invisible ice around her since the transition catastrophe.

Michalovna couldn't blame her. She felt carried away herself, and she knew there would be a grieving period. But at the moment, she was like many other *Tosoma* crew members: a cocktail of euphoria and relief kept her awake. The nuclear fire had been stopped and they had survived. It could have turned out differently, with over two thousand dead. She thanked the universe for their good fortune and the fact that they were still alive.

The three of them entered one of the tunnels that led to the center of the Web. The interior walls were covered in colored panoramic holos showing fiery swirls of light and star nebulae from the systems around Beta Albireo. Although they were only pictures, Michalovna walked more slowly.

I can't believe I'm standing in the middle of an alien space station.

She closed her eyes. Oh, the horrors she had endured. But she now wondered whether the journey had not already been worthwhile for her docking at this station. She had seen things that no human had ever seen. It felt good to be a pioneer, to be brave. As if she were looking for a gold mine waiting for her in the middle of the room.

Crest nudged her. "You'll have time to sleep later." He walked towards a small, three-wheeled wagon used to transport two other

people. The vehicle stood as one of three along the tunnel wall. “A Faku. Come on, it will shorten the distance considerably.”

Michalovna looked around uncomfortably. They had left the ship less than half an hour after Rhodan had authorized it. “Can you just take it?” she asked uncertainly, looking down the long tube. There was no one to be seen in their section. There was only a vehicle far ahead that vaguely reminded her of a quad.

“Yes,” Crest assured her. “That’s why the Fakus are here. Anyone who is granted ‘Hastlu’ may use it. The distances are much too far to walk. So the individual tubes consist of several inner tunnels. Some are reserved for air traffic and may only be entered by authorized Mehandor, but others are accessible to non-clan astronauts. There are several ways to get to the *Ke-Matlon* platform, but this is the most fun. Believe me.” There was a flash of mischief in his eyes.

Michalovna smiled at him. Ever since he had received immortality on Wanderer, the old Arkonide had been transformed. And this despite the fact that *It*, the lord of Wanderer, had initially denied him eternal life. Crest owed his immortality to Rhodan, who had passed on the eternal life that *It* had offered him instead. Passed it on to Crest. Now the elderly alien seemed to be rejuvenated. Although he had always been young in spirit, the energy he had recently displayed surprised and amazed her. She fought against a touch of envy.

So far, immortality does not seem to have had a negative effect on him—on the contrary!

“Come on!” Crest urged Sloane, reaching for her hand like an enthusiastic five-year-old.

The woman gave a shy smile. His good mood was contagious. “Okay, fine, if you’re sure that we’re not causing trouble for Rhodan...”

“Certainly not.” He pulled Sloane over to him and she took a seat with Michalovna in the back of the Faku, which was comfortable and spacious enough for both of them. The bench was wide enough

for three of the petite Mehandor, and a supportive backrest provided additional support.

"Buckle up!" Crest joked, for there was no seat belt to be seen. Instead, Michalovna felt an invisible resistance press against her stomach and hips.

"Crest..." she said, but then came the pressure that pressed her into the black upholstery. *From zero to fifty instantly.* She gasped.

Next to her, Sloane clawed her fingers into the seat and let out a sharp scream. The Arkonide pretended not to hear them.

"We're lucky. Hardly any traffic."

He accelerated, following several fine ruts on the ground, and drove up the wall in a double lane change. The world was suddenly turned upside down.

Sloane groaned and grabbed her wildly drooping hair. Michalovna relaxed. Her body remained in position, fixed by energy fields that held her like the hand of a guardian angel. Gravity changed noticeably; it began to feel normal upside down. Sloane's dark hair fell back onto her shoulders. At a good eighty kilometers per hour, they rushed through the tunnel on the ceiling. The wind tore at her, loosening the tight braid on the back of her head. A pleasant tickle spread through her abdomen.

Other vehicles came into view, one driving under them, a second along the tunnel wall.

"Slower!" cried Sloane.

Crest came back to the ground and slowed down. "Forgive me, Miss Sloane. I couldn't resist the temptation."

Sloane looked as if she would like to push the old Arkonide out of the vehicle. The rapid ride had shaken up her hairstyle. She laboriously rearranged her dark hair. Michalovna didn't need to read her mind to know that Sloane would have preferred to be assigned to another group. But the division was unbureaucratic and without special requests after the matriarch had invited the crew to

move freely around the station. Rhodan wanted to pay tribute to the trust placed in him and had let the first hundred people go after a short instruction against Thora's explicit protest. After all, they were not needed on board.

The Faku slowed down. They reached a tube that led steeply upward. A bright oval several meters wide came into view, and they quickly approached it. They left the tube and jumped over the edge into a spacious open area. From one second to the next, they were catapulted into a strange world.

"Damn!" exclaimed Michalovna. She had fallen into the middle of a Russian fairy tale, into an enchanted forest, the kind she had loved as a child in the stories of Afanasyev, inhabited by magical creatures.

Sloane didn't say anything. Her mouth was open as Crest turned to them, grinning.

"Welcome to *Ke-Matlon*, a Mehandor web!"

Michalovna blinked. The tunnel tube ended on a spacious platform that towered five meters laterally above the one-and-a-half-kilometer-long garden level. They stopped at the very edge and had a good view over a thirty-meter section of the parkland below them. To their right, rocks blocked the view. The other sides were obscured at different distances by plants that towered higher than the landing platform.

Offset under them was a sidewalk. Shapes and colors mixed into smaller buildings, alien creatures, plants, and structures. Only up close did Michalovna recognize restaurants and shops that lay along the golden pedestrian section under colorful mammoth fronds reminiscent of ferns and were naturally integrated into the landscape. The impression of surrealism was underlined by the silence in which the turmoil took place. Although no walls were visible, no sound came up to them from the platform. She wondered what technique was behind the paradisiacal silence.

"We'll disembark here," Crest told her. "It's quite a nice stroll."

Many impressions came over Michalovna like the fighters of an air force. She clumsily climbed out of the seat and stepped closer to the edge of the platform. Her fingers cramped around a high railing, and she felt dizzy. *Am I dreaming?*

Below her, the most diverse aliens cavorted on the golden paths. Many were slim and had red hair like the matriarch; others had trunks on their faces, their skin shimmering in the dim light of Beta Albireo in warm Earth tones.

Instinctively, Michalovna opened himself to the thoughts of the crowd. A spiritual blow struck her. She promptly withdrew her mental gift, frightened. She could not manage to separate the mixture of thoughts that were humanoid and non-humanoid without great effort. It was strange and frightening, with such force that her knees wobbled.

Later, she thought. *When I've seen more. Then I'll try again.*

Surreal-looking plants lined winding paths. Very few of them had leaves like Earthly trees or flowers. Some seemed to consist only of flowers or light. Others had a life of their own and their branches danced in the air. There were several conifers that shimmered bluish. Cactuslike tubers sprayed a thin red secretion upward and wetted themselves with it. Luminous butterflies, which looked more like wrinkled paper than insects, fluttered from plant to plant. No grass grew on the ground, but rather a blue-green moss, crisscrossed by a landscape of fountains and canals that was second to none.

In their symmetrical artistry, the water facilities formed a sharp contrast to the naturally grown plants. Only a few gates separated the individual sections. In between, the water splashed, shimmering in many colors, forced by foreign technology into forms that defied gravity. Like sculptures made of stained glass, the fountains stretched along the paths.

It smelled sweet and spicy, a little like mulled wine and lemon and...simply foreign. Michalovna could not describe it more aptly. At the same time, she knew that this smell would remain in her memory for the rest of her life, merged with diversity, adventure, and the Web.

“What… What’s that?” asked Sloane, pointing her head to a group of plants about thirty centimeters high in different shades of green, vaguely reminiscent of cucumbers.

Only at second glance Michalovna noticed that the plants were not next to the path, but on it. They were moving!

“Swoon,” said Crest. He leaned casually against the railing. “Don’t be fooled by their size. Small but powerful, as people say.”

Fascinated, Michalovna looked at the strange physique. “They have four arms.” Only then did she notice that the Swoon were completely covered. Their clothes, like their skin, were in similar shades. Even their boots shimmered in faded shades of green, although the shafts were interspersed with gold.

“Are they Arkonides?” asked Sloane with interest, pointing at a group of men with bald heads. She leaned forward so far that it looked as if she would fall down into the hustle and bustle of the path at any moment.

Crest shook his head. “Those are Aras.”

“Like Doc Fulkar?” asked Michalovna.

“Yes. They are leaders in the field of medicine. They like to trade with the Mehandor. Their goods are the best—”

“What’s that?” interrupted Sloane. She gestured, although it was rude to point at others. She seemed to notice it as well and quickly lowered her finger again.

Michalovna could tell where Sloane’s attention was directed. Two amoebalike creatures trudged along a sand-colored path next to a garden restaurant. They glittered white as ivory. Numerous pseudopodia surrounded them, growing and regressing. Their flat, oval bodies glided forward rapidly. Several bulges were grouped on the upper sides.

“Xisrapen,” Crest replied patiently, with a smile on his lips. He seemed to enjoy his role as a mentor and tour guide. “Two young specimens. One is about to molt.”

Michalovna, though trying her best, could find no difference between the two beings. The surfaces looked absolutely identical to her. Crest's gaze was much more honed than her own.

"Let's go down," said Sloane, her eyes shining. The blend of sensational novelties, strangeness, and promise finally seemed to have had an effect on her and broken her icy demeanor.

Together, they took an elevator down to the platform and, within moments, were in the middle of the crowd. Laughter, clattering, the calls of animals, and a thousand voices surrounded them. Many used Intercosmo, but some also spoke Arkonide and a variety of other languages that were not interpreted by the translator.

Michalovna would have loved to step back onto the elevator. Uncertain, she touched her pockets, but there was nothing in it that could have been stolen from her.

Crest touched her arm. "You were very brisk on Tramp and Larsaf, Tatiana," he said so quietly that Sloane couldn't hear it. "Like an Arkonide. Your confidence impressed me. What are you afraid of in this garden?"

"The crowd," she replied curtly. As a telepath, she knew better than anyone how unpredictable people could be. She thought of an old wheelchair user she had met in Moscow. His smile had been touching. Then she had read in his mind how much he liked to give young girls knockout drops at rock concerts, simply because it amused him to see them fall over.

"I'm here," Crest said. For a moment, Michalovna feared he wanted to make fun of her, but the look on his face showed how serious the words were. She could rely on him.

She smiled at him. "Let's go."

Sloane was at the top, followed by Michalovna, then Crest. They stayed close together and adapted to the slow walking speed on the crowded paths. Several restaurants and food stalls exuded a wide range of smells. At one corner, Michalovna felt sick, as it smelled so

much of urine. At another, she could hardly go on because her mouth watered and left her craving food.

There were a thousand details to discover: the tiny flower brooch on a Swoon's robe; the purple dumplings in soup, which look like eyeballs; the sign written crooked with foreign symbols next to a restaurant. Every look of an eye, every turn of the head, revealed new wonders. Some seemed familiar, as if they could have been from home. But even those similarities were a little off; everything was crazy.

The deeper I go into the enchanted forest, the more it will change me. Maybe soon I will be a part of it. The thought was terrifying and tempting at the same time.

They passed a twenty-meter-high rock on which several Mehandor were practicing climbing. Instead of ropes, they secured force fields that shimmered like air over a fire. If you didn't look closely, you wouldn't see the fields, and the Mehandor seemed to climb the rock without any security. A cobalt-blue waterfall in ornamental form fell over a steep wall a short distance away. Michalovna thought it a holoprojection at first and was surprised when the drops wet her face like a mist.

"Sit down," Crest suggested. He pointed to the beam floating next to them above a colorful carpet of flowers. "I'll get you some refreshment." He seemed to realize how overwhelming the many new impressions were for her and Sloane.

I wanted to go on this expedition, Michalovna reminded herself, touching her pants around a flat cut on her knee. *I was hoping to discover new worlds, see aliens, but this...* It was so different from her dream of being in space, sitting on a beam in the Web and breathing the spicy air.

In St. Petersburg at that moment, people were probably standing in Alexander Square, watching fireworks and greeting the New Year with their light blossoms, while children sat at home in warm rooms in front of the unwrapped presents that Father Frost had brought them on the last day of December. In Terrania, hangovers would be cured, construction would continue, and the landmark of

the city, the Stardust Tower, would bring the sky a tiny bit closer.

She was unimaginably far away from anything she knew. New sounds shouted at them; an army of noise, which relentlessly marched forward and attacked with pointed lances.

Michalovna closed her eyes and felt the crowd around her. It took her a moment to distinguish between the Mehandor and strangers. She had to push away many of the foreign thoughts because they seemed incomprehensible and caused her headaches due to their intensity. Although many of the passersby moved slowly, she felt a general restlessness that lay like a dark cloud over the garden. Thoughts of the Arkonides flared up in their consciousness as if they were her own. The fears of the visitors and residents of *Ke-Matlon* were palpable. They were distributed equally among aliens like the Mehandor.

“What are you reading?” asked Sloane. There was mistrust in her voice. Like Michalovna, she was a mutant. Together, they had completed numerous training routines at the Lakeside Institute. Sloane knew what Michalovna looked like when she was deliberately trying to read her surroundings. The thin layer of sweat on the Russian’s forehead was often such a sign.

“A mixture of feelings, but above all, uncertainty,” Michalovna replied quietly. “Apparently, many Mehandor are critical of their matriarch. The political situation is difficult.” She concentrated on a beardless Mehandor with red hair stubble and an unusually wide robe, which was colorful. “He thinks that the Arkonide fleet has become active in this sector for the first time in centuries. Many have a similar opinion. It is like a background, a concern that constantly haunts the plans, desires, and goals of the Mehandor: the fear of the regent. No one has a picture of the regent. I’m not even sure he’s a humanoid being.”

Sloane grimaced. Michalovna knew that she felt the telepath’s gift was uncanny, that she was threatened by it. Before leaving, Michalovna had had to promise Sloane in Terrania that she would never examine her thoughts if Sloane did not want her to. Despite this promise, Sloane seemed suspicious.

But she herself has a frightening gift. In her mind, Michalovna saw the Ilts attacking Arkonides on Tramp. Using their telekinetic abilities, they had suffocated the attackers with their own tongues. Sloane also had that power. She was a living weapon.

Blinking, Michalovna tried to dispel the unpleasant thought. As she remembered Tramp, she realized that she didn't see any Ilts on the platform. Were they native to other parts of the galaxy?

"There you go!" Crest returned and handed her a golden cube with a suction port at the top. "Don't drink it too fast; it's still freezing."

Carefully, she accepted the cube and brought the plastic socket to her lips. A sweet, pungent smell rose up from it, reminding her vaguely of chili and honey. She took a sip and tasted sweet fruit. No trace of spiciness.

"What is it?" asked Sloane, who turned her cube around in her hand undecidedly.

"Unithic barberry juice. Distantly reminiscent of raspberries."

Michalovna was taking a deeper sip when she noticed the gloved fingers working their way up to the side of Crest's chest. She hastily lowered the drinking cube. "Crest, watch out!" She jumped forward, seeing small, strong fingers grab the cell activator and tear it from Crest's neck. A bearded Mehandor stormed away.

Crest swung around. "Sloane! Stop him!"

Sloane responded immediately. Michalovna noticed the change on her face. The thief suddenly seemed to stumble upon an invisible object and the activator fell out of his hand in the fall. Sloane had beads of sweat on her forehead as her face contorted with exertion.

Michalovna jumped forward, but when she and Crest reached the bearded Mehandor, a second had already bent down and picked up the jewellike device on the chain. They stopped and turned on the man. He was petite, wearing a tight black top and a wide, dark blue skirt made of solid fabric. His outstretched arm protruded

challengingly. The activator dangled like a pendulum in the air.

“Give that to me!” said Crest. His voice sounded tense; his body seemed ready for battle. Michalovna was frightened by the arrogant aristocracy that suddenly lay in his appearance.

The Mehandor lifted the activator to eye level. “Nice and easy, Arkonide.” He smiled. “No one wants to keep your property from you, okay?”

Out of the corner of his eye, Michalovna saw the thief pull himself up and stomp away. Two Mehandor in uniform pursued him.

“That was stupid of this bearded man.” The stranger returned the activator to Crest. “A very clumsy attempt. He risks exile.”

“Would you have done better?” said Michalovna. She tried to penetrate the stranger’s mind, but an invisible wall blocked the attempt. She opened her mouth in surprise. Why couldn’t she read his thoughts? Was he particularly protected or had she overused her gift by eavesdropping on the Mehandor?

His appearance threw her back: the curious eyes, the broad forehead, the slightly mocking smile on his thin lips. His skin was stretched smooth and tight, only around the eyes could you guess that he was already middle-aged. There were numerous wrinkles around them, and Michalovna thought that they weren’t due to excessive smiling.

The Mehandor laughed. “You wear your heart on your sleeve, colonist.” His laughter was contagious. It seemed authentic.

Crest put the activator into his breast pocket. The chain, from which the device had previously hung around his neck, was bent on two links and no longer usable. “Thank you. My name is Crest da Intral. What’s your name, Mehandor?”

“Levtan. You’re new to the Web, aren’t you?”

“We’re passing through. Like most.”

Levtan tilted his head. “You can’t say that. After all, tens of thousands of clan members live on the station. Shall I show you around a little?”

Alarm bells were ringing for Michalovna. She exchanged a quick glance with Sloane, who also shook her head in warning. No doubt she shared this bad feeling about the Mehandor, even though he had helped Crest. His manner seemed a bit too jovial. Not being able to read his mind was more than unusual and worried Michalovna.

“No thanks,” she began. We—...”

Crest interrupted her. His hand was clearly visible on the breast pocket around the activator.

“Of course, Levtan. With pleasure. Show us the best sides of *Ke-Matlon*.”

5.

Cyr Aescunnar

January 5, 2037

Near Bradbury Base, Mars

"Hetcher, come in! Say something, dammit!" Aescunnar barked so loudly into the microphone of the radio that he almost believed the deaf Ferron, whose Mars mobile was working its way through the Valles Marineris three kilometers ahead, could hear him.

Aescunnar used Hetcher's special frequency for emergencies. Commander Riembau was certainly using the same to stop the Ferron and call him back to Bradbury Base. The frequency flashed a bright blue light on the deaf man's wrist pod at rhythmic intervals, alerting him to the incoming transmission.

Secretly, Aescunnar hoped that Hetcher would keep his device on, even though he was being inundated by communication requests from several sides. Eventually, the historian ignored Bradbury Base's numerous Supreme Priority requests as he decided to pursue Hetcher. He was pretending to be dead like a beetle while moving from the base at almost thirty kilometers per hour in a vehicle called a "beetle" because of its wing-like awning.

Ironic, if not redundant, thought Aescunnar. *A dead bug in a beetle. And it looks like there are two of them chasing each other.*

"Hetcher, come in!" he shouted over the radio in his helmet. Underneath him, the beetle rattled over a bump in the ground; its suspension compensated for the hard impact and the spacesuit absorbed some of it as well. Nevertheless, he felt the jolt unpleasantly in his tailbone.

Stone number one thousand two hundred, since I've been out, he thought sarcastically. Mars had the biggest basalt desert in the entire system.

The six large wheels filled with air carried him safely over the harsh subsoil of the canyon, seven kilometers deep and hundreds of meters wide. The huge awning spanned the pulpit like raised wings. Still, it felt like Aescunnar was floating freely in the gigantic Martian wasteland. Like a forgotten ghost in a red natural castle of rocks and rocks, where no one had dusted for thousands of years.

For a moment, he felt an all-encompassing loneliness and a fear of never getting back to civilization. If he had an accident, it was all over. His bones would be buried with the beetle under millimeter-thick rust-red dust in the middle of this endless canyon in the Valles Marineris. It could take years for someone to find his remains.

He pulled himself together. “Hetcher, I know you can read me. You have a screen right in front of your impressive nose.”

Again, nothing. No answer, as if Aescunnar were merely imagining the Ferron driving through the same unspoilt, brittle landscape in front of him, stirring up dust with the tires, drawing his tracks in the ground, and having it in his massive head to simply continue from the base—for the second time, even though the first solo effort had almost cost him his life. Only Aescunnar’s courageous efforts had saved him.

Why Hetcher had done that and was now doing it again, Aescunnar did not know. But he felt that he had to follow him. Under the bright Martian sky, the historian was chasing not just a Ferron, but a mystery.

“Great things are happening here,” Hetcher had hinted a few days ago. And with the last gestures he had made to the Terran, he had shouted, “I hear!” Only that. “I hear! I hear!” A strange phrase for someone who was deaf.

Aescunnar nervously scraped his boots over the much-too-shallow footwell. His long legs did not fit properly into the dimensions designed for Ferrons. Compared to terrestrial technology, theirs was far ahead. But again, Terran and Ferron technology were only two closely spaced sections of a primitive technological age. Aescunnar wished his Mars mobile was of Arkonide origin instead. Then, this specter of Hetcher’s escape

would be long gone and he could stretch his legs.

Restlessly, his gaze wandered over the consoles. The embedded display was blank. There were also no sounds of life, only silence. Aescunnar slowly lost his patience. Perhaps he had to try something new: not to ask Hetcher or to snort at him in a heartfelt way, as Riembau had undoubtedly mastered to perfection, but to provoke him.

“Hetcher, you sabotaged all the vehicles in the station. Because of you, the team is stuck for several hours and cannot carry out important maintenance work. And that’s just so they can’t track you. Are you proud of your ego trip?”

He held his breath. Had he gone too far? Then again, what did he have to lose? He did not believe that Hetcher was mentally ill or suicidal or that he had gone out into the Martian wildness for any selfish reason. Nor was Hetcher a saboteur like Doctor Tempsky, who, in her divine delusion, had wanted to nip the terraforming of Mars in the bud on behalf of the Young Earth Creators.

There was a reason the Ferron was acting as he was. Hetcher had a secret, and Aescunnar would discover it.

Suddenly, he saw himself sitting on the indigo blue carpet in his father’s study as a child. As a rule, he wasn’t allowed in there. His father was a German diplomat. All the papers, even those that were not in the embassy but at home, were too valuable to be touched by chocolate fingers or end up as paper planes. It was hard to imagine what a child monster like Aescunnar could do in the holiest of rooms. But his parents were not there just then. His father was at the embassy and his mother had gone shopping. So Aescunnar had sat cross-legged in the study in front of a sealed box on the floor and unpacked it. He had bent up a corner of cardboard and realized that they were objects wrapped in newspaper. His heart racing, he had repeatedly looked around in shame but couldn’t resist the urge to take out an object.

At the time, he had been six year old and believed that he would have to die or go to bed without dinner while being read the riot act if his parents found out. Still, he had unpacked the object layer

by layer. And then the next one. And the next one. In the end, he had it in front of him: the whole Armenian set of dishes, plates, cups, saucers, decorated with blue-red ornaments. He hadn't known that his grandmother had sent it. He had carefully wrapped everything up again and put it back.

Aescunnar had never been discovered. For him, it had been as if he had found a secret treasure. Later, he had loved those dishes in the kitchen cupboard the most.

As he had back then, he now saw the brown cardboard clearly in front of him, had lifted a lid, and recognized packaged objects inside the newspaper. He had to know what kind of objects they were, or, in this case, what motives. After all, it was Hetcher who fascinated him this time.

Just as he had decided that Hetcher would never return his transmissions, he heard the voice of the computer translating the Ferron's sign language.

"I do what I have to do."

At last! Contact!

Aescunnar leaned forward and held his breath. He thought about what he could say. He had to keep Hetcher engaged and entice him to keep talking. Since the provocation had worked well, he tried it further and vented his feelings.

"This is madness! Do you understand? You're worrying everybody, okay? There's nothing out there. Only salmon-colored skies, basalt, and sand! Come back!"

"Just because there's nothing for you doesn't mean the same applies to me."

Aescunnar sensed another packaged item in the box. "What do you mean? What's out there?"

"Maybe just peace from annoyances like you."

The Terran considered confronting Hetcher with the fact that he

was an oddball, a Ferron cast out by his own species, fleeing society. But he sensed that wasn't true. That arrow would not even begin to hit its target. Hetcher seemed to have come to terms with his separation. There was another reason he was plowing through the canyon at top speed on a self-imposed mission.

Instead, he asked, "What do you hear, Hetcher?"

A long pause followed. "You're the only one who at least tries to understand me, Aescunnar. But even you don't hear the world as it is. You know they wouldn't have let me go, so I manipulated the Mars mobiles. I had to do it."

"Why?"

"Go back, Aescunnar. Before it's too late."

"Hetcher..."

"You don't belong here. I do. I don't want anything to happen to you."

Although the words were being translated by an emotionless computer, Aescunnar felt their urgency. It wasn't a game. His fear that his bones could be buried under red sand along with the Mars mobile were justified. If he got into danger, no one would come to save him.

Hetcher cut the connection. Aescunnar stared intently forward. He looked along the dark tire tracks to a point where he thought he could see the cloud of dust glistening in the sunlight, which Hetcher's beetle whirled up in slow motion in the low gravity and pulled behind it. Beetle chasing beetle.

He wouldn't give up.

6.

Hetcher

Voices

They claimed to hear, but they heard nothing. They said they could speak, but when did they ever say anything of importance? For them, words were just meaningless strings of sounds that they did not feel and did not appreciate. They did not sense the spell they wove when they spoke, nor did they hear how wrong they sounded when they disregarded universality in language. Each small gesture had its own vibration, an inaudible sound that vibrated in the big picture and honored the divine when harmony was given.

The best example for Hetcher was the Red Planet, which the scientists had turned to after the terrestrial humans had revealed almost all secrets on their blue sphere. Hetcher tensed his abdominal muscles and spat into the helmet tube with squinted eyes.

They call it Mars. After a god. They unscrupulously use this name to honor the planet, and what do they see in it? A lifeless, freeze-dried rust ball!

He had even found the name “smallpox face” in records. An ugly name that alluded to the numerous craters of the planet. As if the world consisted only of its surface.

For Hetcher, there was no Ferron with a blue beard sitting in the sky, on a planetary ring, or on a moon, waving a scepter. There was what there was. And that was so infinitely more than a single Ferron, Topsidan, or Terran would ever capture. The more ego a being possessed, the more deaf it became to the magic of eternal omnipotence. The animals were happy and poor at the same time because they could not reflect the happiness that had been bestowed upon them, and they would never chase the unknown spot behind the horizon with a full stomach.

When he had left the Vega system and reached Earth, he had hoped to find like-minded people among the humans. Before departing for Mars, he had been given data, studied the history of the Red Planet, and laughed at the religious-political faux pas of the Romans, since in Greece certainly no human wanted to descend from bloodthirsty Ares. Aescunnar had supplemented and expanded his knowledge with literary and mythological stories. But even before discovering the exciting tales of man, Hetcher had studied the planet, which, if one imagined it terraformed, resembled his homeworld.

He had already twisted his mouth at the word “planet,” because according to the translation, the word meant “to wander.” That’s how Terrans saw it: planets wandered around aimlessly. No trace of divinity or higher providence.

But there were the beautiful names that a man named Schiaparelli had attributed to Mars when creating a new map in the nineteenth century on Earth: “Elysium” and “Tharsis.” This didn’t sound like a reality that could be mapped, but rather a matter of longings, visions of the distant, the strange, and the sunken. These names resonated well with the planet; he had sensed that when he read it. Unfortunately, people like Schiaparelli seemed to be rare.

A boulder under the tires shook the vehicle. Hetcher sensed the stone, which was happy to be noticed. The boulder had caressed the wheels, had asked to be touched, and the vehicle also buzzed brightly; joy swirled around it like a cloud of golden light. They drove forward, always forward, touching the living ground, caressing it together with the millions of years it was old. That was good. Every speck of dust sparkled to please Hetcher, and he had come to make the dust grains laugh. Wasn’t that his real purpose in life? The task he had at that very moment? In the end, it was all about feeling the moment, no more, but also no less.

Hetcher grimaced. If he had been able to laugh, there would have been loud sounds, warm and primitive, which would have sprung from his mouth. *They think I’m alone*, he thought in amusement. *Cyr thinks I have to be lonely in what he calls the wasteland of Mars. He knows so many stories about this planet and yet understands nothing.*

It was not true. Hetcher had never been alone. Everything around him lived, breathed, felt. Things had auras surrounding them and promised that they were more than just things. Every tiny speck of dust had a soul. Many of them sang incessantly, honoring their being and existence. They were peaceful; it was enough for them to exist, to sing self-forgetting, and to rise from the ground shining like miniature stars when the vehicle's tires greeted them loudly.

Hetcher closed his eyes and felt who wanted the most entertainment around him. It was a rock, perhaps a kilometer in front of him, calling out to him.

"I'm coming to you, Brother Rock," Hetcher said in sign language as the Mars mobile continued, automatically making its way through the rocky desert. "You are no longer alone among your peers, my friend. My path will cross your location. Hetcher hears you, oh yes. Your voice speaks clearly."

He opened his eyes and looked forward, into the sharp cones of the headlights that illuminated rust-red ground. The sun had just set over the sea of rocks. The salmon-colored glow changed, becoming a warm blue-violet that swept across the sky and honored the light of Vega. Had the sun not been tiny, Hetcher might have believed for a moment that he saw the familiar blue light from his homeland.

All of Mars has a soul. Like Earth and every single planet in the Vega system. If you are completely still, you can hear the whispering of the soul…how they whisper to each other through the infinite vastness and reveal millennia-old secrets.

The vehicle traversed kilometer after kilometer. Thanks to the autopilot, Hetcher didn't have to worry about anything. It followed the established route through Valles Marineris to Sinharat Base. He knew that the base was not his true destination. He had toyed with the idea of stopping at one of the supply stations to replenish his food and oxygen, but now Aescunnar was breathing down his neck. Hopefully that madman would give up before it was too late for him.

"Hetcher," whispered the stone he was leaning towards, "hurry

up. I'm not the only one waiting for you, you know? My sister wants to see you too. She has been waiting as long as the sun has shined, as long as it has existed, formed from stardust. She's waiting for you. You are needed."

With a shudder, Hetcher leaned back and stared past the edge of the collapsing awning into the blue-violet sky. Clouds of ice drifted over it like the outstretched fingers of a hand. They also spoke like stones. They loved him as they loved everything. Among them there was no betrayal, no intrigue or treacherously whispered insults behind closed doors. In this place he was among friends.

The stone sang softly. Hetcher perceived it as pulsating colors that he saw in his mind and felt warmth when he closed his eyelids.

"I, too, have been waiting for this moment," he gestured. "Since I was stardust." He didn't know if that was true, but it felt right to say it.

The hours passed, became days. At night, the unit that supplied the Mars Mobile buzzed; during the day the awning aligned itself above it and supplied it with the necessary energy for the fuel cell. He had enough water and food with him not to suffer excessively. A food concentrate relieved the worst symptoms of hunger and thirst. He never got bored. Whirling wind funnels built up around him, barely as high as a man. They accompanied him at some distance, waved to him, and then went back to sleep.

The sky changed hourly, varying its colors in a myriad of browns, reds, and oranges up to pink. The soil also varied in color. Rust was what the humans called it. Hetcher had other names for it. A thousand names that he had never revealed to anyone else. There were as many colors for it as there were boulders on the ground.

He had long since passed the calling stone, passed his sister, and driven on, on and on, not wondering why he was doing this. He knew. There had been one man who understood him better than anyone else—even better than Cyr Aescunnar. Perhaps a second Schiaparelli. Hetcher thought wistfully of Nguyen, the former commander of Bradbury Base, who had disappeared without a trace a few weeks prior.

“We’ll help you find him, Hetcher,” whispered the dust. “He’s alive, oh yes, he’s alive.”

“Keep going,” sang the sun’s rays. “Always ahead. Don’t be afraid. We’ll send you comforting clouds by night and the light of two moons.”

Far before Hetcher, the volcanoes of Tharsis Montes came into view. A cry sounded that vibrated through him, stronger than the engine of the Mars mobile that made his body tremble. “Hetcher, come to us! Come and join us! We’re waiting for you!”

It was not one who spoke, but many. Each volcano had its own voice. Together, they roared in him, like the bells in Terran churches; they must have rung when one stood close below them.

For a moment, he feared fainting. He was dizzy; he lost his bearings as if he were rolling weightlessly over in a red sea of dust. Above, below, everything blurred around him.

“I’m coming,” he gestured faintly, making only the most necessary movements. “Oh yes, Hetcher is on his way. Hetcher is coming to you.”

He looked at the displays and made a gesture of gratitude and understanding to them, as if to apologize. If he drove to the volcanoes, the range of the Mars mobile would be exhausted. Although it could theoretically drive endlessly over the plains, the oxygen supply was slowly running out. There was a goal…but maybe no way back if he didn’t stop at a supply station.

A faint doubt crept up on Hetcher. He could hardly make out the volcanoes as such due to the kilometer-long climb, but he felt they were mountains. He remembered well the overwhelming visibility during the crew’s approach, when they had flown over the three extinct shield volcanoes. Everyone else had looked down and certainly said things like, “Oh, look, the second-highest volcano in the solar system!” or “Ascraeus Mons: it’s eighteen kilometers high! Impressive, huh?” and “The foundations of the mountains are so wide that you could walk up in low shoes.” But they hadn’t felt what was really down there.

Hetcher, on the other hand, had hardly been able to suppress the trembling all over his body. He had felt the three gigantic miracles beneath him, felt their voices vibrating to the rhythm of his heart in his chest, seen their colors like colorful explosion vortices before his closed eyes.

Hetcher straightened up in his seat. Bones and muscles hurt him, but he hardly noticed. As if in a trance, his hands and facial expressions formed the same words over and over again.

“Hetcher is coming to you. The wait is over.”

“Imaxal ura ranhanka.”

“Always pay with a smile.”

Mehandor

7.

Perry Rhodan

The Price of the Mehandor

"Crest? Where are you?" Thora sounded indignant. She had turned her face away from Rhodan and was staring into the black-tinted window of the four-seater station vehicle.

Behind them, John Marshall shifted his weight into the upholstery. Rhodan wondered if Marshall was equally nervous about the upcoming negotiations with the Mehandor. Responsibility for the crew of the *Tosoma* lay heavily on his shoulders.

Twelve people, he thought, and not for the first time, saw the image of corpses laid out by robots in a refrigerated room. *And I only had thirty minutes to myself after the last speech to the team before I had to leave for the Web. Thirty minutes to realize that they're dead. I was supposed to be over there helping Reg, who's preparing the funeral ceremony. But I can't divide myself into two, and my team needs me as a negotiating partner for each individual.*

"Crest? Come in!"

"Can't you reach him, Thora?"

Thora lowered the small radio and latched it into a device on the bracelet on her wrist. "He's not accepting the transmission—-and at such an important time. He should be here."

Rhodan looked at the speed display and converted it. Eighty kilometers per hour; they would arrive in a few minutes. The triangular vehicle rushed automatically through the narrow, oxygen-free tunnel. Every now and then a long holographic advertisement for a restaurant or an amusement hall appeared, which inevitably made Rhodan think of the novel *Fahrenheit 451*, of the advertising posters that stretched hundreds of meters along the highways.

“I’m sure Crest is fine,” Rhodan reassured her.

“Too fine,” said Thora pointedly. “I’m afraid he didn’t even take his communications device with him to the Web. He was in a hurry to go.”

Rhodan had noticed Thora’s gaze as her foster father had set out into the Web in the tow of Michalovna. Was the Arkonide beginning to feel jealous of the Russian? Crest and the mutant had survived many adventures together. A friendship of a very special kind had grown between them.

The vehicle changed direction, flying into a turning tube. It had been sent to them by Matriarch Belinkhar and was taking them to the headquarters of the Web, in the middle, below the garden platform.

Rhodan’s stomach twitched when he thought about the upcoming negotiations. He sought Marshall’s gaze. The former investment banker was used to conferences and meetings, but what was coming was completely different. They knew little about the Mehandor—not a good prerequisite for their upcoming business. On the *Tosoma*, Rhodan had not stood in Bull’s way when he wanted to investigate the Mehandor and the Regent, but access to the information networks had been blocked. The *Tosoma* was not granted permission. Bull had suspected that Thora and Crest were behind it by having positronics block access within the ship, but Thora remained Rhodan’s only source of knowledge, and she kept a low profile.

Knowledge is power, he thought. *And Thora doesn’t want us to gain power. She wants us to depend on her and Crest.*

“We’ll have to pay, won’t we?” he asked her.

Marshall looked over at the Arkonide as attentively as he did. It was good to have a responsible and reliable friend at his side.

Thora shrugged. “Everyone has to pay.”

“Do you have any idea what the price will look like?” interjected

Marshall. He had come with them to provide support with his parapsychic gifts. Through his ability to absorb the thoughts and moods of others, he would know how the matriarch felt towards them.

Rhodan half-heartedly wished that Marshall would break his code of honor, and that of the Lakeside Institute, and read Thora's mind. Then he could hopefully silence Bull's warning voice inside him and trust her fully again. He couldn't let go of the question of why she had introduced herself under a false name. What harm could the Mehandor do with her real name?

Thora turned away. She squinted and gave the radio on her wrist a bitter look.

"Please, Thora." Rhodan put a hand on her forearm. "If you know something that could help us..."

He fell silent as the vehicle abruptly changed direction and climbed up like an anti-grav platform into a vertical, twelve-meter-wide tube. They had reached the middle column, which lay between the central unit and garden platform.

The vehicle braked suddenly and headed for a landing platform four meters under a seemingly open sky. They had reached their destination. They touched down and slowly rolled through an energy transition. The transparent roof opened to two sides and slid back; ladders automatically folded down the outer wall.

The air smelled fresh and sweet, as if blossoming fruit trees were growing next to them. The smell was in stark contrast to the simple tunnel wall, which showed no holos at this point and merely looked like steel adorned with a honeycomb pattern.

"Let's go." Thora evaded his question. She seemed to suspect what he meant but obviously didn't want to talk about it.

Rhodan pressed his lips together. *So far, Belinkhar seems like a reasonable woman to talk to. It must be possible for us to reach an agreement.*

The responsibility on his shoulders threatened to bring him to his knees. He had been the motivating force behind the expedition to Arkon, not to endanger human lives or recklessly set out into space with an ancient ship, but to beat the Arkonides to it. He wanted to determine the conditions under which contact with the Empire was established.

The daring of mankind, the diversity of their crew, and the para-talents of some crew members were meant to impress Arkon and the Regent, as well as to assist Thora and Crest in their mission. After all, Crest had gained eternal life with the help of mankind. If that didn't impress them, what would? But so far, the trip had been a disaster. They were lucky that their losses hadn't been worse.

A black metal door at the entrance to a transport shaft slid open and sank into the wall. Rhodan involuntarily thought of an elevator in a parking garage. In the opening, a tall, gaunt Mehandor appeared in a white uniform with lime green trim. Like most Mehandor, she seemed more delicate than a human. Her limbs were reminiscent of those of an elf.

Rhodan immediately recognized her as the matriarch. Short red hair framed a haunting face with wide-open eyes and sharp features. Close behind her stood a man, quite beefy for a Mehandor, leaning slightly forward. Unlike the matriarch, he wore a slate-gray uniform with an unusually wide cut. In contrast to Belinkhar's, his eyes seemed small, and he eyed the newcomers suspiciously.

Rhodan involuntarily touched his neck, where a tiny device had been implanted. Once again, he was struck by what a miracle the translator, which enabled him to understand both Interkosmo and Arkonide, was.

"You must be Tiara da Intral," Belinkhar began in Interkosmo. "And who are you?" She looked from Thora to Marshall and then Rhodan.

Thora stepped forward. She seemed stiff. "This is Perry Rhodan, my first officer, and John Marshall, advisor."

"Pleased to meet you." Belinkhar made room for them and led

them onto a two-meter platform that quickly moved upwards. “My companion is Etztak, my shadow.”

Rhodan wanted to ask with interest what a shadow was, but he noticed Thora’s warning look in time and interpreted it: he should not let it be known how little he knew about the Mehandor.

Rhodan felt a hint of anger. *If Thora had not been so secretive, I could have prepared myself better for this meeting. Why is she withholding information from us?* He pondered again what the Mehandor could ask of them as a price. After all, they had so far saved their lives. In addition, Rhodan hoped, the Mehandor would be able to repair the ailing *Tosoma*.

Belinkhar led them into headquarters, a circular, sparsely furnished room with the same diameter as the tunnel below. Impressive were the panoramic windows, which formed the limits around the room instead of walls and provided an unobstructed view over the central area and a large part of the station. The view into space was overwhelming as well. Below them lay Snowman, as if they wanted to dance on its pole; but around them stretched an endless expanse of velvety black like a sea of darkness, while the two suns were dimmed by the garden platform. In front of the windows, a total of seven consoles with controls stood at regular intervals. Holos hovered in the air above four of the control panels. One showed the station in miniature. At an outer docking port, Rhodan recognized the *Tosoma*.

“Let’s sit,” Belinkhar demanded curtly, pressing a sensor on the wall. The floor folded with a mechanical sound before forming a table. “Five people,” said the matriarch, turning away from them. Five chairs formed in the same way as the table.

Thora sat down as a matter of course. Rhodan and Marshall followed suit. From the table top came a tiny platform with five cube-shaped, closed containers and a golden plate with slices of red fruit. The plate split into five equal parts.

“Let’s not waste time.” Belinkhar sought Thora’s gaze. “What kind of ship is it?”

She's straightforward and intelligent, Rhodan thought appreciatively. *She is not fooled. The shadow, however, makes a less than brilliant impression.*

Rhodan confidently reached for one of the plates and a drinking cube. Since he had to leave the conversation to Thora, he didn't want to be pushed too much into the background and was eager to at least do something.

Seemingly relieved, Thora leaned back. Rhodan knew her well enough by now to correctly interpret the tense line around her mouth. Much depended on whether the matriarch would believe her or not.

"I was the commander of the research cruiser *Darion* and went on a mission two years ago to study some unusual multiple star systems. Through a chain of unfortunate circumstances, my ship was wrecked in the areas of the Empire's greatest expansion. Nearly all of my crew died. But I came across a lost Arkonide colony: Terra, inhabited by Arkonide descendants who call themselves Terrans. On the planet was the *Tosoma*. I managed to make the ancient battleship spaceworthy again and start the journey home."

Belinkhar listened intently, not a muscle twitching in her face. Her gaze seemed more alert and suspicious than before.

Rhodan took a sip of the drink. It tasted sweet and refreshing at the same time. He had to force himself not to stare at John Marshall, who had hopefully found out what the matriarch was thinking.

"The engine malfunctioned meaning that the *Tosoma* could not continue," Thora continued. "But with the help of your clan, Matriarch, I am confident that we can resume our journey to inform the Regent of Terra's rediscovery and enable the Terrans to join the glorious Arkonide civilization."

Belinkhar raised an eyebrow mockingly. "I'm curious to see how the Terrans will enjoy the reign of the Great Empire."

Thora waved it off. "Don't be ridiculous, Mehandor. Nothing

better can happen to the Terrans than to join Arkon."

"Really?" The matriarch looked at Rhodan blatantly. "Do you agree, First Officer Rhodan?"

"I'm fully behind my commander," Rhodan replied a little too quickly. He exchanged a glance with Marshall, who nodded barely noticeably. Belinkhar seemed to believe Thora's story.

"I understand." Belinkhar put on a non-committal smile. "Terra's position?" Her inquiry sounded innocent, as if she were asking about Snowman's current temperature.

With a shudder, Rhodan thought about what would happen to Earth if the planet's position fell into the wrong hands. The technology of the Mehandor, according to Crest and Thora, was almost on a par with the Arkonides'. Would the matriarch subjugate the Earth if she had the opportunity?

Thora's answer came politely but firmly. "This communication is reserved for the Regent."

Belinkhar showed her teeth. "Of course, Arkonide. All in the right order? Fine. Let's move on to trade! May I ask the advisors to leave the room?"

Rhodan looked at Marshall; he didn't like this development. The telepath was their trump card. Marshall would be an invaluable help to them in the negotiations.

"Is that absolutely necessary? We have no secrets from him."

Belinkhar raised an eyebrow in surprise. "That's interesting, but irrelevant. Trading on a station is always conducted to the exclusion of advisors."

She said it in a tone that indirectly rebuked Rhodan. He caught Thora's warning look. Apparently, he had already said too much.

He forced himself to smile. "As you wish, Matriarch."

Belinkhar waved her hand imperiously. Etztak grimaced as if he

had gone through a transition. He straightened up in his seat. “I protest! You should give in to the first officer’s request in this case.”

“It will be noted. Trade must be satisfied, Etztak. You know the rules. Accompany John Marshall out and offer him a hot Savia.”

The advisor stood up and trudged out of the headquarters. John Marshall followed him hesitantly.

Belinkhar waited until the metal sliding door closed behind the two men and they were alone. She looked at Thora and Rhodan one by one and put her fingers together, her forearms resting on the tabletop in a triangle.

“I’m having your people watched,” she said abruptly. “They are no ordinary colonists. They have not yet forgotten how to be amazed. That’s why I want to make you an offer: forget Arkon. Join us. You won’t regret it.”

Rhodan stared at the matriarch as if she were an apparition. Had he heard her right? Join the matriarch? To do what? Become a member of a Mehandor clan?

Thora’s face twitched as she visibly struggled for composure. She leaned back.

For a moment no one spoke. Only the quiet hum of devices could be heard.

“You know what you’re asking us to do?” asked Thora after a while, having regained her composure. “Your offer surprises us. Our allegiance is to the Great Empire. We’d love for you to help us get there.”

If Belinkhar was disappointed, she didn’t let on. Her eyes narrowed a bit, but her face still seemed friendly. “Then I must demand the price from you. You, Arkonide, know it.”

“The Seventh?”

“That’s right.”

Rhodan leaned forward with his forearms propped up and pushed the drinking cube aside. “What’s that?”

The matriarch tilted her head. She stared at Rhodan challengingly. “One in seven of your crew stays aboard the Web for seven years. Your work, impulses, and ideas will be the payment for the repair of your ship and the further expenses of your stay.”

Rhodan thought the floor below him would fall away. He pressed his hands against the table, looking for support. “Impossible!”

“It’s the only way.”

Thora averted her gaze.

Rhodan could not demand such a price from anyone in the team. They had left to make contact with Arkon and then return home, not to do seven years of compulsory service on a space station. They had expected to be on the road for maybe a few weeks, not longer. Most had family, friends, lives they wanted to return to. How could he take all that away from them?

The more he got upset inside, the calmer Belinkhar seemed to become. Her gaze became friendly, and there was compassion in her voice.

“That’s trade, Rhodan. Both sides give something. Your people will have it better with us than with the Regent or on the primitive world from which they come. With minor differences, they will be on an equal footing with members of the clan. They may even be able to help refresh our gene pool.”

“I can’t ask that of my people.” He looked to Thora for support, hoping that she would offer a way out. After all, this was her and Crest’s mission, and the two had to have powerful friends. But Thora remained silent.

Rhodan collected his thoughts. The last few hours had taken their toll. He felt clearly that he was not mentally at his best. Nevertheless, he had to pull himself together and get the best out of the situation.

“I also think the pay is inadequate. Let’s say we needed another repair at a later date or your people missed a problem. Would we have to provide one-seventh of the team again?”

Belinkhar made a negative gesture by holding out both hands to him. “You will have a certain contingent of stay and repairs for seven years. The conditions are fixed and will be sent to you with the standard contract.”

“So I could fly to this station for seven years?”

“Right.”

“Then I suggest that I ask on Terra who wants to live on this station. I’m sure there are volunteers. The current crew has a mission; no one is dispensable. You repair the ship, and we’ll get you the desired number of people.”

“Shall I take your word for it? No, this is not trade.”

“Then we’ll replace the crew left behind on the Web.” He looked at Thora. This would delay their journey home to Arkon by a few weeks, but Thora had to understand that Rhodan could not abandon his crew. Their team too priority.

“I’m sorry,” Belinkhar dismissed him. “The rules say that you have to make up one-seventh of the team immediately. A later exchange is not desired by us. We train your people, integrate them. Each further acclimatization phase costs Chronners and time.”

Thora leaned forward and touched his forearm. “We have to pay if we want to move forward.”

Rhodan would have liked to have spoken sharply to her. Did she, of all people, have to put him under further pressure? Was Bull right that Thora’s journey home to Arkon was worth every sacrifice and that she used the Terrans like pawns in a chess game?

“We have dead to mourn,” he said, turning to Belinkhar. His voice sounded calm as always; he knew how controlled he seemed outwardly, although he was freezing inside. “I don’t know about you, Belinkhar, but we honor our dead and take care of the

bereaved."

Belinkhar lowered her gaze for the first time since the conversation began. "I invite you to lay your dead to rest in accordance with our traditions. In an hour, a barge will depart, a small ship that is specially marked."

She activated a sensor at the table and entered a sequence. A pea-sized broadcaster flew up and projected the golden room from the shape of a cube that Rhodan had noticed on arrival. "The ship is steered into the sun; our dead become part of the light in this way and are with us with the light."

"Thank you!" Rhodan meant it sincerely. "Your offer is most generous, I will discuss it with the officers and give you an answer as soon as possible. Unfortunately, it is not our sun, and perhaps some individuals wish to be buried on the Terran homeworld. We will consult their wills and decide how to proceed."

"Agreed. I'll send you Ara medics and supplies on board if you agree to the Seventh. The injured will want for nothing, and surely you need to replenish medical stocks."

"How much time do I have to discuss the matter with the crew on the *Tosoma*, Belinkhar?"

"As long as the repair takes. You can clarify during this time who is willing to stay behind, but you will have to pay. As I said, your people will be fine."

"And if no one can be found?"

Belinkhar raised her arms, her hands acting like a wall against Rhodan and giving her stance decisiveness. "No Seventh, no repair."

Rhodan lowered his head. He searched for arguments with which he could change the matriarch's mind but couldn't find any. He had nothing to offer that even rudimentarily corresponded to what was required and thus represented a real alternative.

"All right. We'll pay the Seventh."

“Soi haka itamaikkan, uwot te-siu.”

“Only what you have touched lives in you.”

Mehandor

8.

Levtan

Forbidden Paths

Levtan looked at the two women who had just stepped out of the changing room. Both were different from Mehandor women or Arkonides. They acted as if they had never seen a Mehandor station before. Their behavior attracted him, but at the same time repelled him because it was so foreign. On the one hand, he liked their curious looks, the doubts and questions; on the other hand, they confused him.

I have become old and conservative. In the past, I would certainly have tried to seduce one of the two simply because they are different.

"I don't know," murmured the woman named Anne Sloane, who was so slim she could have passed for a Mehandor, touching the light red-blue spacesuit she had pulled over her clothes. She held the helmet indecisively in her other hand.

"What don't you know?" joked her companion, Tatiana Michalovna, whose big eyes fascinated Levtan. "Do you think it makes you look fat?"

Sloane gave her companion a scathing look. "Whether we are doing the right thing. We should gather information, be somehow useful to Rhodan, and not engage in leisure activities."

Levtan stepped closer. He felt an unpleasant tingling sensation in his legs, a first sign of withdrawal that worried him. "Oh, I'm going to give you a lot of information, Sloane, don't worry. But isn't it much nicer to see with your own eyes? There is an old saying of the Mehandor: 'Only what you have touched lives in you.'"

Sloane did not seem convinced by his words. She looked around nervously, as if looking for an escape route.

Behind them, the Arkonide Crest da Intral stepped out of a second changing room. He looked old, but his posture was that of a much younger man. He moved powerfully and confidently. His spacesuit sat perfectly. Levtan had found him his exact size.

"Shall we?" asked Crest.

Levtan circled one hand in confirmation and walked forward. Crest and Michalovna followed him at a short distance. Sloane fell back. Her face seemed closed.

"They just want to persuade me to race or to do some other job that makes their clan profitable," she muttered.

Levtan stopped and turned to her. Disarmingly, he opened his arms. "You are completely misjudging me, Miss Sloane. Nothing we currently do costs you a single unit. I want to show you *Ke-Matlon*. My home. I was born here, and I'll die here. I'm proud of that."

Michalovna looked at him critically. She seemed to want to examine his statement in a way that he could not understand.

How could she do that on Ke-Matlon*? Even the most sophisticated drone spy would fail due to the defense fields. For that, she would have to be able to read minds, and no one can.*

Nevertheless, her inquiring gaze unsettled him. Levtan turned away and walked on. He was only half as proud of *Ke-Matlon* as he had said. In order to honor the truth, he had long wanted to get away from this clan, which was not his, and down from the Web that repeatedly taught him humiliation and despair. But where to? He did not need to be seen in his own clan. He could be glad that he had not yet been sent into exile.

Levtan led the group out over an exit to the outside of the Web and put on the helmet. His companions followed suit. He helped Michalovna press the sensor, which activated the airtight lock between suit and helmet.

"The sight will surprise you," he promised, speaking into the integrated helmet speaker and making sure with a quick glance that

the trio followed him as a unit. “Please stay together and be careful not to push yourself off the ground too tightly. Out here, the generator fields end irregularly and sometimes abruptly. Above the movement zone, space begins. The light suits are not designed for the low pressure prevailing there. The oxygen in the tank would expand and create cracks. I don’t think I need to go into what that means. Move carefully if you are not used to walking in low gravity.”

The tingling in his legs became a burning sensation and spread to the abdominal and trunk area. It spread like a plague. Slowly but surely, the Kan’or effect diminished. Soon, Levtan would need supplies.

His gaze flitted over Crest da Intral. He should not waste his time with the three clan strangers; he should take care of his problems instead. But something about the nature of the Arkonide and the whole group fascinated him and made him attentive. Somehow, profit had to be extracted from these three in the form of information or objects. They were special and he had a flair for special people. And if it was only their exotic clothes that he would talk off them in thanks.

Thoughtfully, he considered the *Tosoma*, from which the strangers had come and which he and Izkat had already noticed on arrival. *A mystery surrounds this crew, as does their ship. How many centuries old was that spacesphere?*

Discreetly, he examined the piece of jewelry, which stood out as a bulge in the breast pocket of Crest’s spacesuit. Too bad Izkat had not succeeded in robbing the gem. Levtan did not understand why his friend, disguised as a man, had stumbled in this precarious situation. She had acrobatic skills as well as a lot of others. Never before had she stumbled in a theft of this kind. If she hadn’t failed, he would have already taken his next dose of Kan’or. But he had had to distract the group from Izkat so that she could escape.

“Hold on tight,” Levtan said, turning back. “The bridge is slippery because of the ice.” He climbed onto a narrow corridor with waist-high railings that ran along the outer wall.

Behind him, Michalovna started to slide but was still able to hold on. “Maybe we should have gone spacesurfing,” she murmured. “I’m not very gifted in ice hiking. And the prospect of suffocating doesn’t make it any better.”

“Spacesurfing?” asked Sloane. The Terran sounded interested. “Is that like surfing the waves? Is that also available here at the station?”

Crest intervened. “When we were queuing for the holo jump, Michalovna and I saw advertisements on the waiting platform. There must be a separate space section of several kilometers on the other side of the station, which is kept free for such activities. Right, Levtan?”

“That’s right. A net of Arkon steel surrounds it so that no one can surf out of bounds. Young Mehandor in particular love spacesurfing. But see for yourself!” They followed the cylindrical body around a sharply bent corner. A viewing platform came into view in front of him. He stopped and waited until the others had caught up with him. “Isn’t *Ke-Matlon* beautiful?”

From that position, one could see the mighty network of Arkon steel, which lay silvery, shimmering at the station, and at first glance looked like another docked support. Next to it, tiny points of light raced through space along the track filled with Janraklui speedsters. There was at least one race per unit in day mode. In the gambling halls, you could bet on the results of such races.

A bit away from the net, several spaceships of various types were docked to the long arms of the station. Behind their bodies shone the white-blue planet Gedt-Kemar, illuminated by the distant double sun. Levtan wasn’t looking. Just the fact that he had glimpsed the ice world made him shiver.

“The *Tosoma*!” exclaimed Michalovna. “Look, repair work has begun!”

Levtan admired the Terran’s good eyes. In fact, several blue-red robots the size of a space runabout glided along the ship’s outer shell. Machines of this color scheme made precise scans and

analyses that preceded the repair.

“I’d rather look at the planet. It’s beautiful,” Sloane whispered. Her concerns seemed to have been wiped away. “What’s the *Tosoma* in comparison?” She looked reverently at Gedt-Kemar. “Its craters form intricate signs, as if there were a message on its continents.”

Levtan could not resist the temptation to get closer to her. Their hands almost touched on the railing pole. “Make no mistake, Sloane. Gedt-Kemar is beautiful. And deadly. An ice world that demands the highest from everyone who goes there.” He gathered his courage and looked down at Gedt-Kemar. There was, in fact, a beauty that had escaped him so far.

Sloane met his gaze. “Have you ever been there?”

Levtan laughed. “I’m not crazy! No one goes to Gedt-Kemar voluntarily!”

Sloane stretched out her arm as if to touch the planet covered in furrows and cracks. “A crew member called the world Snowman. But I don’t see a snowman.”

“Because it’s upside down at the moment. Do you see the circular turbulence in the lowest third? That’s the upper part of the figure.”

“Yes. I see it. How big are its outlines?”

“Several thousand kilometers.” He made sure that Crest and Michalovna also immersed themselves in the sight of the ice world. If they hadn’t been wearing spacesuits, it would have been the perfect moment to steal from them. All three stared, distracted, out into space.

The withdrawal pain reported with a vehement pinching and quickly grew stronger. He felt as if pliers were torturing his innards. He didn’t have much time.

Levtan smiled charmingly at Sloane. “Did I promise you too much? A sight seen only once in the galaxy.”

“Well, if you don’t go far,” Crest commented mockingly but

good-naturedly. “Gedt-Kemar actually has a unique pattern, and the webs of the Mehandor are worlds worth seeing in themselves.”

For a moment, Levtan was speechless. An Arkonide had something positive to say about a Mehandorstation?

“Thank you!” Levtan decided to mark day three in Dasgae 8356 red in his private holo journal. In general, the arrogant Arkonides didn’t have much good to say about the clans. Envy gnawed at them because the Mehandor had not lost themselves in nonsensical fictional games, but had remained powerful and alert in spirit.

They really are different. Crest too. He seems much too young for his age.

Levtan was used to dealing with strangers like no other on *Ke-Matlon*. After all, despite all the shady trade and petty thefts, he had not been caught for many years, and that was partly due to his sense of knowing exactly what he could afford with which beings and how far he could go.

Nails dug into his stomach and boycotted his thoughts. They supported the pliers. At the same time, a familiar, dull pain set in in his kidneys. The second phase of withdrawal began. If he was unlucky, his nervous system would cause problems. He had to break off this little trip. Sweating, he took a step back from the railing.

“I know an outstanding Unither bar on the garden platform. It would be a pleasure to accompany you to the end of our trip there.”

The pain in his kidneys increased rapidly. With horror, Levtan understood that this withdrawal was unusually violent. Fear, black and devastating, suddenly destroyed any clear thought.

Crest turned to him. “No, thanks! Let’s stay for a while and then...”

The words of the Arkonide became quieter and quieter, losing all meaning. Levtan’s muscles spasmed, contracting unwillingly. He fell to his knees and jumped off, away from the platform.

No...no...no!

Panic rose in him and took his breath away. His jump catapulted him right towards the critical zone. If the artificial pressure suddenly subsided; the protective suit would only last for seconds.

Below him, Michalovna cried out, “Anne, grab him!”

Levtan felt himself being carried farther and farther up. The voice of the colonist was joined by a second voice through the mechanical loudspeaker integrated into his helmet.

“Warning. You have reached the critical zone. Get to safety immediately.”

I am, you fucking bastard!

Desperately, Levtan tried to change course, but his body wouldn’t obey him. Like a lifeless sack, he drifted farther and farther up. The pull increased steadily. He could feel the pressure drop abruptly. By the time a rescue unit was with him, it would be too late.

He saw it in front of him: the three-man, gold-colored machine that recovered his dead body and flew towards the refrigerated ship. Haklui Jakar would come up to his laid-out corpse, shake his head and say, “Yet another one who illegally used the outer passages. Some never learn!”

Horror gripped him, shook him along with the withdrawal cramps, and clouded his thoughts more and more. He looked at the Web and saw the faces of Crest, Michalovna, and Sloane as washed-out bright spots against greasy silver. He was being sucked farther out; he felt how the oxygen in his chest expanded and inflated his lungs painfully.

“Warning,” sounded the suit positronics. “Rapid pressure loss. Oxygen in the tank is now being released for safety reasons.”

Levtan exhaled, panting. He had only seconds. He was already feeling dizzy.

Then, he was suddenly rammed by something invisible. Confused, he looked around. A counter-thrust pushed him back

towards the platform. He felt as if a hand of energy was pulling relentlessly on him until he caught hold of the railing.

Michalovna grabbed his forearm and helped him back onto the platform. For a few moments, Levtan could not let go of the railing. The Terran helped him loosen his fingers.

“Oxygen discharge has been stopped due to pressure stabilization,” the positronics informed him.

Levtan was nauseous and, despite the helmet, his eyes burned. “What was that?” His body trembled as if he were lying naked on the refrigerated ship, ready for the sun barge, while he had just escaped death.

Sloane put on an innocent face. “Nothing. You were lucky. A security feature took effect and pulled you back.”

Levtan knew she was lying. There was no security feature. The Mehandor, who were out here permanently for maintenance, were required to wear heavy suits that offered stable pressure conditions in space in addition to heat and oxygen. What was she hiding from him? A higher technology?

His calves contracted uncontrollably and he stumbled. Before he fell, the old Arkonide was with him and held him up with surprising strength. Crest brought him safely to the ground, grabbed first his right, then his left leg, and relaxed it in a few simple steps by pulling the tips of his feet in his chunky boots towards his shins. The pain subsided abruptly. Levtan’s breathing calmed. Carefully, he sat up.

The Arkonide knelt beside him. “You should definitely seek medical care. Such seizures do not come out of nowhere. You might have a serious illness.”

“Just a circulatory weakness,” Levtan groaned. The cramps slowly subsided. He reached for the Arkonide’s chest to support himself, one of his fingers sliding into the breast pocket open at one end and bumping into an egg-shaped piece of jewelry.

Although he was wearing gloves, he flinched. A burst of energy whipped through him and dispelled his lightheadedness and weakness within a second.

"What is that?" he whispered.

Crest pushed him away roughly. "Get your hands off my property!"

Levtan braced himself against the railing and raised his hand apologetically. He felt a hair-thin crack in the plastic of the glove, which was closed by the self-healing material.

"Leave him alone," Sloane said, unexpectedly defending Levtan. "He was just trying to get up. Let's make sure we bring him in. He needs a doctor."

Crest nodded, though the gesture seemed reluctant. Levtan stood up in surprise, leaning against the railing. He felt better. The stinging sensation in his stomach and legs had disappeared as suddenly as the pain after a transition had been overcome. The dull throbbing in the kidneys had also become weaker. He felt the burst of energy that had been driven from the egg-shaped gem over his finger and into his body. A shiver ran from his spine down to the pelvis.

These are no ordinary astronauts! Suddenly, Levtan saw it clearly. These three newcomers had special powers and objects. The jewelry was not jewelry at all, but something else, a kind of device. What had Izkat said? The Empire paid for special colonists? Levtan had wondered what a colonist had to possess or be able to do in order to be worth so much to the Regent. Now the answer stood before him in triplicate. He didn't have to sell their clothes or jewelry. He had to sell *them*. Complete, a set, just as they were. If the Empire wanted them, he would be able to afford Kan'or for the rest of his life!

Sloane held out her hand to him. "Come."

Her oval face with friendly eyes stung Levtan. *She just saved my life. What an ungrateful Ma'pek am I to even think of doing that to her and her friends?*

“Miss Sloane is right.” Crest nodded at him. “You have done enough for us. Let’s return to the Web.”

“No!” Levtan stretched. He knew what to do. “You and your companions saved my life. I am indebted to you. Come with me; I can provide you with information that is most valuable to you.”

Crest hesitated, but Levtan could tell from his expression that the Arkonide was interested. The extensive information networks of the Mehandor were famous. If a Mehandor wanted to obtain information, he would obtain it. There was little that the Arkonides and the Regent could keep secret from the clans. Their networks were vast, their sources reaching into the highest circles.

“Information?” asked Crest.

Levtan turned his hand. “Yes. Come! You won’t regret it.”

“Kunkondor ulop Ke-Matlon Te-lanlon, kemai uhunlon nattin Te-funlutdor.”

“Trust is a web in the heart that is never reached by a fleet of thoughts.”

Mehandor

9.

Belinkhar

Melancholy

Belinkhar lay on the Ratu couch in her private relaxation room, looking at the holographs above her. Several groups of people could be seen on it, consisting of Terrans from the *Tosoma*. A fair-skinned man with narrow eyes and a clever look smiled as if he knew there was a camera aimed at him. You could see his fatigue; deep shadows lay under his eyes; a wide, jagged scar ran across his forehead. At the same time, he seemed curious about his surroundings. He spun in circles on the garden platform, not seeming to be able to decide where to go first with his companions.

Gyrikh would have sent her away, Belinkhar thought. She considered her sister's familiar features, the long nose, the determined chin, and the indescribably beautiful green eyes. Most of all, she missed Gyrikh's warm way of laughing. *Gyrikh and Etztak would have made a good team. Both never cheated.* Ke-Matlon *was Gyrikh's life.*

She closed her eyes and felt melancholy. The gap created by Gyrikh's death in the hierarchy of the Web was only one of two. Belinkhar was much more pained by the emptiness in her heart.

"Matriarch?" came a hesitant voice. "Can I speak to you for a moment?"

She blinked. Etztak had walked up silently behind her. As her shadow, he was free to visit her private rooms at any time. Normally, Belinkhar was not disturbed by his presence, but it was precisely in this intimate moment, when her grief over the loss of Gyrikh wanted to break through, that she felt harassed.

"You want to express your concerns to me again?"

"I did some research. Contacted confidential sources in

government circles." Etztak stepped close in front of her, his upper body slightly tilted, as if he wanted to throw himself onto the couch with her.

Impatiently, Belinkhar waved her hand. She would have loved to send Etztak away. "And? Did that help? Did Tiara da Intral lie?"

Etztak led both hands from his chest towards the ground. "No. A *Darion* actually set out for a research flight from Arkon two years ago. She is considered missing."

Belinkhar straightened up on the couch, swung her legs over the edge and sat upright. "Of course she is. How else could these Terrans be explained?"

She stood up and looked at one of the holos. A stocky, bald man lifted a Swoonian Orm roast to his mouth with two fingers, put it on his tongue with pleasure, and then shook himself like a wet Ma'pek. His expression showed real horror at this culinary insult to his taste buds; his bushy eyebrows forming a line of indignation. Nevertheless, he immediately reached for another dish while taking a sip from a drinking cube. Belinkhar could hardly tear herself away from the sight.

"Amazement is written all over their faces. Some have never seen aliens."

Etztak huffed. "They are uneducated savages. What value shall we derive from them?"

"Education can be imparted. Curiosity can't."

Etztak leaned forward so far that she could smell the subtle scent of Jaris fruit, the peel extract from which he used to care for himself. Although the smell was pleasant, she felt oppressed by it.

"The *Tosoma* endangers our clan! The commander, Tiara da Intral, and the scientific director, Crest da Intral, are most likely oppositionists." Etztak was now the picture of righteous indignation. A vein swelled on his forehead. "Why else do they let us help them and not Arkon? When the Regent learns that we—"

“But he won’t!” replied Belinkhar sharply. She felt a piercing pain behind her temple. This time, Etztak took his role too seriously. His high-handedness disgusted her. “No one knows about them. And no one will know about them. In three Arkon hours, the *Tosoma* will again be spaceworthy. The damaged structure field converters can be replaced after minor adjustments by the converters we have in stock. The ship will leave the Web and we will keep the Terrans, who don’t care about the Regent.”

“Do you really not care about him, Belinkhar? And what shall we do with them?”

Belinkhar felt her patience tear like a poorly maintained steel strut. “We’’ve already discussed that. We will receive valuable information from them. New ideas are to be promoted!”

“Like cheating?” hissed Etztak. He did not like the fact that she repeatedly called on the young Mehandor to do their service outside the Web and to let themselves be taken on strange ships to other worlds and Webs.

“Like cheating,” she confirmed calmly on the outside, but inside she was agitated like the seas under Gedt-Kemar’s ice surfaces.

Etztak’s hands trembled. Her advisor seemed to be on the verge of telling her all the things they hadn’t talked about since she had become matriarch a year earlier. To a certain extent, Belinkhar wished that he would finally lose his temper, insult her, and openly say what really bothered him: that she was a stranger he detested, a corrupt Mehandor who had spent decades of her adult life outside the Web and therefore seemed suspicious to him.

Then I could finally tell him to his face what a narrow-minded, smug piece of space junk he is. Having fallen into the rigidity of old age, he circles senselessly in an orbit of ignorance and compulsiveness.

The rising contempt silenced her. For several moments, Belinkhar and Etztak looked at each other without speaking while the bald man in the holo turned to the Swoon drinks and was served two dozen thimbles.

Etztak's agitated breathing slowed. He leaned back. "You know that this Rhodan lied. I know guys like him. He will refuse to relinquish the Seventh."

With the change of topic, Etztak was making a peace offer without explicitly saying so. Belinkhar turned away from him in disappointment and looked at the holographs. The cleansing quarrel had not come again.

"That's what I assume. But we won't give him a chance. Should the Terrans resist, we have the right to arrest as many of them as we want. Have the backup plan prepared."

Etztak took a step back. "Yes, Matriarch." He hesitated. His gaze went back and forth between her and the entrance of the room.

Belinkhar looked away from him. She made no effort to sound friendly. "Is there anything that prevents you from doing your duty, Etztak?"

"It..." He seemed to be searching for words. His foot touched down slightly, as if he wanted to make a gesture of importance. "No, Matriarch," he said after a pause. "It's all been said." He turned and left.

Belinkhar took a deep breath and sank back onto the couch. She looked at the bald Terran, whom apparently no one had warned how the drinks of the Swoon could affect Arkonides. He staggered, laughing, and asked for an object that he called a "frying pan" to "cook something sensible." The Moolworm secretion of the last drink had clearly put him into a hyperactive state. He would suffer from terrible stomach pain after he got some rest.

"Poor Terran," Belinkhar whispered, leaning back on the couch. "Your awakening will be terrible."

10.

Cyr Aescunnar

Martian Dust

Aescunnar rolled restlessly in the seat. The spacesuit became more and more a bulky coffin in which he felt buried alive. He thought he could smell the waste that had been removed. How he would have liked to put the damn thing down, throw it in the dust and leave it there. But the atmosphere of Mars didn't leave room for humor. Even at a very rare ground temperature of twenty degrees in sunlight, a warming protective suit was needed at a height of one meter because of the low air pressure.

On Mars, the air pressure corresponded to that of the Earth's atmosphere at an altitude of over thirty kilometers. Two meters above the ground it was already up to thirty degrees colder. The average temperature was seventy degrees less than on Terra. This had probably not always been the case. Due to the weak magnetic field of the planet and its low density, it was assumed that the atmosphere had probably been eroded by the solar wind over time. The air was dry; its composition dominated by carbon dioxide. In the end, the suit was the only protective bastion available to him against the hostile conditions. But he wasn't comfortable.

Aescunnar finally fell asleep. He dreamed of standing at the bottom of the gigantic Valles Marineris without a protective suit. The radiation of space bombarded him with invisible ions; behind him he heard an apocalyptic thunder that he believed to be the volcanoes of Tharsis Montes spitting lava. But it wasn't lava gushing up through a hotspot. The kilometer-high wall to his right broke open, and with an infernal roar, he saw a second wall of mud rushing towards him like the wave of a tsunami.

Masses of debris, ice and bubbling water swelled towards Aescunnar miles high, as if the entire planet were a champagne bottle that someone had shaken too hard and which now foamed with its sulfurous contents. The mixture would flow four thousand kilometers, over Bradbury Base, destroying their insane attempt at terraforming.

When he woke up, he felt reasonably rested.

He continued steadily eastward. The last automatic supply station along the route to Sinharat Base was far behind him, unused like the others. Aescunnar hadn't dared to stop there so as not to

lose Hetcher for good. If the Ferron didn't rest, he wasn't allowed to either.

For five days and five nights, he drove through the monotonous, albeit beguiling, orange-red landscape in its poverty and simplicity. Sometimes a cloud of ice of particular beauty appeared in the dark sky, sometimes a tornado by day, which fortunately quickly subsided each time. A light storm came up for several hours and scratched with sandy fingers over the dome glass like a monster with long claws. Beauty and loneliness, dull moments, and surprised amazement had alternated through him at the beginning of the journey. Aescunnar was reminded of the Egyptian desert with its dunes and stone fields, except that the sun, much praised in Egypt, was one and a half times as far away from Mars as Earth—or Terra, as it was recently called.

He had seen gypsum deposits that differed in brightness from the rust-red and brown rock. Just recently, he would have liked to have stopped to see the remains of a Mars Pathfinder rover that the display showed was just a few miles away from his route. The Pathfinder had quit its service decades ago and, like many other remnants of space exploration, had since lain untouched in the place where its engine failed.

At first, Aescunnar had looked for meaningful activity and, above all, paid attention to moving around in the vehicle and the now hated protective suit, tensing and loosening his muscles, putting the seat back, lying down in different positions when he could not walk. He had even tried yoga. He had a file on his tablet read to him again and again by the computer. It was Hetcher's file, which contained the Ferron's collected gestures.

Aescunnar had used footage from Hetcher at Bradbury Base to facilitate a new way of communicating with the Ferron. By carefully analyzing sign language with the computer, it had become possible to store it in a translation program through which Hetcher's sign language could be translated in real time. There were almost ten hours of material in the file.

On the ride, Aescunnar had listened to the translated signs a total of three times since he had left Bradbury Base. He overheard

Hetcher afterwards as he recorded himself, but most of it seemed trivial to him. Hetcher talked to things, humanized them, and even saw friends in some. Worth considering, perhaps, because it was a little crazy in any case. But there were no clues as to the secret that Aescunnar was looking for. It was only on the third hearing of the translation that he noticed that one word repeated itself more often than others: the word “wait.” Now that he had a short rest, he wanted to check that abnormality.

Aescunnar sat upright, his joints cracking. He had all the sentences that contained the word “wait” spoken to him again.

“I know you’re waiting for me,” said the computer. “I’ll come; you’ve been waiting a long time.” A short pause, the computer searched. “You don’t have to wait any longer.”

A shiver ran through Aescunnar. He looked around the Mars mobile uncomfortably. Of course, he was alone, the seat next to him just as empty as the emergency seat in the back. Nevertheless, he felt a diffuse fear. As if Hetcher were not only imagining the beings waiting for him, but had actually mysteriously made contact with an alien civilization on Mars that aimed to put Aescunnar in a cage with a sign: “Human in natural habitat.”

He remembered the many stories he had told Hetcher while they were working together, from the little green comic man with an antenna on his head to Wells’s well-known novel *War of the Worlds* and Weinbaum’s *Mars Odyssey*.

Hetcher is talking to things, Aescunnar thought to calm down. The long drive through the rust-red wasteland was making him paranoid. *There is no one outside. He believes that stones have a soul; his whole worldview is deeply animistic. But as long as he doesn’t start sabotaging or attacking others, that’s hardly a reason to imprison him.*

Aescunnar breathed in and out slowly. Five agonizingly long days lay behind him. How many times had he talked to Louanne Riembau over the radio? He didn’t know anymore. Riembau had threatened, cursed, verbally vented all her anger at him, but she had not managed to persuade him to return.

“You imagine that because you have exposed a saboteur, I will give you special freedoms, Aescunnar. But I have to disappoint you. Among all the extraordinary people here at Bradbury Base, that’s nothing special. In fact, as a scientist, I would expect you to think logically. You are a scientist, aren’t you? What’s the point of this nonsense of pursuing a vehicle going exactly the same speed? You are fighting a losing battle. If Hetcher doesn’t want you to, you’ll never catch up with him!”

Yes, he had enjoyed his debates with Riembau in the silence of Mars. Her rants showed a trace of life, and Aescunnar understood the woman. Bradbury Base had already lost a loved one on this mission. The last commander had mysteriously disappeared. Beneath her anger was fear for him.

A bright tone sounded and tore Aescunnar out of his thoughts. “Speak of the devil,” he mumbled. His mouth felt dry as dust—he had rationed the drinking supplies heavily and was forcing himself to eat only as much as necessary.

“Riembau to Aescunnar, please come in.”

“Aescunnar here. What can I do for you?”

“Turn around and get your historian butt back to my base!”

“Negative. Hetcher still hasn’t stopped, I’m afraid he’s going all the way to Sinharat Base.”

Riembau’s voice showed her irritability abundantly clearly. “Where are you, Aescunnar? At Station F?”

Aescunnar wanted to answer, but a glance, at the map distracted him. It was hard for him to believe what he saw. The beam of Hetcher’s Mars mobile was no longer on the established route. If Riembau had not distracted him with her transmission, he would have noticed it earlier.

“One moment, please!” He drove more slowly before finally stopping. In front of him, he saw the tracks of Hetcher’s vehicle on the ground, making him shudder. The six wide tires had eaten into

the dust as black tread prints. They showed a sharp curve. For a moment, he said nothing and pondered. Hetcher had left the route to Sinharat Base. He was driving in the direction of the three shield volcanoes. There were no supply stations there. No food, no water, no oxygen.

Aescunnars's fingers clung to each other tensely.

"What's wrong?" asked Riembau. "Are you finally considering obeying my orders?"

"Hetcher turned. He left the route. If he continues in that direction, he'll reach the shield volcanoes."

Silence. He wondered if Riembau was thinking what he was: the volcanoes, near where Commander Nguyen disappeared. Had they misjudged Hetcher all along? Was the Ferron going on a crazy rescue mission after the searches for Nguyen before him had failed?

"Turn back!" demanded the commander.

The vehemence of her words impressed Aescunnar. A small voice in him said that Riembau was right. He had to stop this madness before it was too late.

"You've asked for that a hundred times. What makes you think I could do it this time?"

"You may be odd, but you still have a few marbles left. Hetcher is lost. The range of the Mars mobile may theoretically be limitless, but we both know that it isn't in practice. If the Ferron drives to the Tharsis Montes, he runs the risk of no longer being able to reach a supply station. Hetcher will die. When his oxygen runs out, it's over. Do you love him so much that you want to share this fate? Your suit may be Ferron high-tech, but it's not an Arkonide marvel. You know as well as I do that oxygen cannot be filtered out of the Martian air because of how little there is. Your consumption is likely to far exceed your stocks in ten hours at the latest. Do you want to suffocate like a fish on dry land?"

Aescunnar did not answer. Instead, he entered the data of the

Mars mobile into the on-board computer. The Tharsis Montes were a good three thousand kilometers from Bradbury Base. Although Aescunnar had already covered most of the distance, he had not yet used a single supply station to replenish his supplies. If he drove on, he would no longer be able to drive to a station and thus endanger himself and the vehicle.

It took the computer a few seconds to substantiate Riembau's statements in a striking way. Aescunnar's chase was over.

He closed his eyes and listened to the voice inside him. It was the same voice that had advised him as a six-year-old to go into the study and unpack the box on the indigo blue carpet. The voice that had lured him to the highest mountains on Earth and to hostile areas such as Saturn's moon and Mars.

And this voice expressed itself loud and clear, completely unmistakable: "Continue!"

He hesitated. This time it was not about a cardboard box on a carpet. His life was at stake. If he continued, he could not make his way back unless a miracle happened. Aescunnar believed in energy and reason, not miracles.

He took a deep breath, listening to the silence that absolutely reigned around him. It took some time before he could speak.

"Thank you for your concern, Louanne. I want to make one thing clear: what happens to me is not your responsibility. You are not to blame."

"Cyr, don't be ridiculous!" It was the first time she had called him by his first name. "You're a good man. I don't want to lose you! You can't catch up with Hetcher, you know that! Both your vehicles are equally fast. You won't even be able to talk to this madman in person before you take your last breath!"

"I'm sorry, Louanne. I've made my decision. Aescunnar over." He ended the transmission. For a moment, he sat still and hesitated. He felt as if he had one last chance to turn back. If he drove on, he would miss that last chance.

I'll follow him. I'll catch up with him.

Despite the dangerous situation, Aescunnar grinned. It had just occurred to him how he could achieve the impossible.

"If you make a contract with a Mehandor, read it ten times."

Arkonide

11.

Perry Rhodan

Plans and Questions

Bull beamed at Rhodan as he entered the *Tosoma*'s bridge and slapped his upper arm exuberantly.

"Perry, you old scoundrel! How did you do that again? Several hundred robots have befallen us and are repairing the ship as if the world were going to end tomorrow morning! It's a sight for the gods!"

Rhodan couldn't return Bull's euphoric smile. He looked around the bridge, empty but for Bull and his companions. Thora was sitting at her station. John Marshall sat down in an empty chair.

"Reg, you don't know yet what the price is. The matriarch demands the Seventh. Every seventh crew member has to stay on this station for seven years."

Bull's elation vanished instantly. He clenched his hands into fists. His face changed color. "You're not serious, Perry," he blustered. "We can't do that! We can't leave anyone behind!"

Rhodan exchanged glances with Marshall and Thora. "I didn't want to bring up the subject in the presence of the Matriarch, but can't the Regent help us?"

Instinctively, Thora took a step back. "I have to advise against that."

"Why?" The question was as simple as it was justified, but it seemed to rob Thora of her composure.

"The Regent doesn't care about such trifles!"

"Such trifles?" echoed Bull. "There are more than two thousand lives at stake, damn it!"

“It’s about colonists,” Thora replied. “They do not interest the Regent to this extent.”

Rhodan turned pale and suddenly froze. Bull’s gaze made his distrust of Thora grow abruptly.

“We can’t expect any help from Arkon on this matter?” Secretly, he had hoped for it.

“No.” Thora crossed her arms. “Arkon is not an option. At least, not at this point. First, we must get to the ruler on our own. Then we can ask him for help.”

Marshall listened silently; Rhodan noticed his suspicious gaze. Was there a reason for refusing to contact Arkon that they were not aware of? Rhodan had already asked Thora more than two hours ago why she did not try to contact the Regent or at least Arkonide government agencies; after all, she’d had the opportunity to send a transmission through the Web. Thora’s statement that she didn’t trust the Mehandor, that the conversation would certainly be intercepted, seemed to him more and more like a flimsy excuse.

Was the hypercom aboard the Tosoma truly destroyed by age, or was that just another lie to cover up her and Crest’s hidden agenda?

Bull’s expression was even clearer than Marshall’s. His friend felt betrayed by Thora. He looked at Rhodan challengingly.

“We can’t abandon our people more than 300 light years from home where they’ll be made serfs, Perry!”

“Nor will we. How long will it take for the *Tosoma* to be capable of flight again?”

“You don’t believe that!” But despite Bull’s indignation at the Seventh, he couldn’t manage to hide his enthusiasm for the technical marvel of the Mehandor as he answered. “Three hours! The rest of the damage…”

“We can have it repaired somewhere else,” Rhodan interrupted. “We have to get away as soon as possible. The longer we wait, the more time Belinkhar has to prepare and prevent our escape.

Unfortunately, we still don't know if she trusts us."

Rhodan had not sat down, and John Marshall looked up at him from his chair, exhausted. Like many crew members, he had slept too little in the past few days, and the cracks were beginning to show. Deep circles lay under his eyes.

"I'm sorry I wasn't there. I would have liked to examine Belinkhar's thoughts."

"It's fine, John. We have to assume she's suspicious of us. That's why it's all the more important to dispel her doubts. Reg, you have to arrange for other crew members to visit the Web so that the Matriarch doesn't suspect anything."

"Send out more people?" Bull scratched the red stubble on his chin. He hadn't gotten around to shaving for hours. "Shouldn't we be getting them back? Otherwise, we'll be forced to leave some behind."

"You underestimate Belinkhar. If we gather everyone immediately, she'll see through our plan. How are Gucky, Kakuta, and Ras? Are they able to work?"

"They're recovering. Gucky is back on his feet, but he's still exhausted."

"Good. Send people out and tell them to inform the others that we're leaving in three hours. By then, as many as possible should be back. The rest should gather in certain places so that the teleporters can transport them or troops can free them by force if necessary."

"Okay, Perry." Bull grinned confidently. "We'll take care of it. I haven't seen a lot of defenses on the Web. I don't think they'll take us on when we leave. As it stands, they're relying on neutrality, not armed force." He turned away and went to his workstation to pass on the orders.

"I don't know if that's a good idea." Marshall looked at them thoughtfully. "Maybe we should pay."

"The Seventh?" Rhodan was sure he had misheard. "And who

but myself can I ask to sacrifice seven years for the Terran Union? I need to bring these people home, John! Isn't it enough that twelve of them are already gone?"

Marshall raised his hand reassuringly. "I understand you, Perry. Truly. But the Mehandor seem to me to be fundamentally honest and experts in law and order. The thoughts I've been able to capture from them and Belinkhar so far do not show any cunning. They're not interested in taking advantage of others. They abide by rules. Believe me, I've worked with lawless youth long enough to know about such issues. This station follows rules, and if we violate these rules, it can have bad consequences. Then we become the outlaws."

"We'll ask the Regent for help to mediate as soon as possible. And when we return to Earth, we'll ask who wants to leave Terra voluntarily for *Ke-Matlon* to fulfill the Seventh. I'm sure there are people who want that, especially if they get Terran perks and appreciation for it. In my eyes, every brave pioneer is a hero, just like every single member of this team. But I'm not going to force a single person to do it."

"Then I hope you'll at least manage to renounce the use of armed force. It hasn't done anything good in my life so far." Marshall bent over his leg and stroked it with a contorted face, as if he were still pained by the gunshot wound he had suffered many months ago.

Rhodan noticed that Thora did not interfere in the conversation. She sat with mask-like features at her place at the holo console, surrounded by several representations showing different areas of the Web: two young artists gliding through space on surfboard-like devices; a group of five employees from the galley lying with sunburnt faces on stony loungers embedded in a dreamlike garden landscape as they slept; a black-haired woman standing in front of the multi-surface display of a shop, touching a matte gold jewelry clip, her finger sinking into the metal, which was obviously a holo display. Rhodan recognized Mildred Orsons and Julian Tifflor climbing a cliff. Julian seemed to float freely in the air, held by invisible fuses. Below him, a watercourse foamed past the rock.

The pictures changed and showed more small groups—Thora

seemed to be looking for something specific. She leaned forward with concentration.

“Where are you, damn it?” she whispered in Arkonide.

Rhodan stepped up beside her. “What is, Thora?”

“It’s Crest. He is in the Web, but I can neither find nor reach him! And in this situation, of all times.”

She said nothing more. Rhodan knew what she was alluding to. If she didn’t find Crest, he could be left behind on the Web with Michalovna and Sloane.

“This is unusual for him,” Thora continued. “He must have left the media-monitored area. But why?”

“I’m sure there’s a harmless explanation, but we don’t have to rely on speculation.” Rhodan turned to Marshall. “John, I know you didn’t get enough sleep, but I’d feel more comfortable if you were there. Your gift could be of great benefit and could save a lot of time.”

Marshall nodded. “I insist on coming along anyway. Our departure will be an irrefutable sign to the matriarch that we will stick to the trade.”

“Yes, I think so too.”

Thora stood up and the images around her were suddenly extinguished. “Let’s go.”

“Is it a Ma’pek or a Mehandor?”

Arkonide

12.

Levtan

The Traitor

Levtan led Crest and his two companions from the *Tosoma*. He could clearly sense her suspicion; Anne Sloane and Tatiana Michalovna made no secret of it.

“What information?” asked Michalovna. “How is it going to help us?”

The woman is smart and attentive. I shouldn’t underestimate her. Levtan stopped close to a transition to the interior of the Web and turned to Michalovna. Behind her back, Gedt-Kemar loomed like a warning to him.

“I have a contact who maintains relations with the Regent’s innermost circle.” He looked at Crest. “He can give you important insider information about the current political situation.”

Crest, who was standing in the corridor between Michalovna and Sloane, made himself a bit taller. Despite his age, he looked imposing. “That’s well-intentioned, Levtan, but why should we need this information?”

Levtan began to sweat. The withdrawal symptoms were making themselves felt again. A knife scratched the wall of his stomach, and he felt overwhelmingly thirsty. If this Crest did not depend on information because he came from the highest circles, then Levtan was done for. But an Arkonide that came directly from the Regent himself did not travel in a wreck like the *Tosoma* or rely on the support of the Mehandor or any colonists. It was much more likely that Crest da Intral was an oppositionist. And even if not, the most loyal supporters of the Regent did not necessarily know what was happening in the highest circles.

“The situation has changed fundamentally,” he improvised. “My

informant has indicated that the Regent is willing to break with centuries-old traditions in order to achieve his goals. You've been on a field mission for a long time, right, da Intral? If you want to do without my help, that is your choice, and I will not bother you any further. But if you want to get knowledge that gives your clan a decisive advantage, come with me. Your decision."

Sloane took a step closer to Crest. "We should turn back to the *Tosoma* and talk about it."

Michalovna nodded affirmatively. "The information will still be here."

Crest shook his head. "You're both wrong. The *Tosoma* will be repaired in a few hours. The Mehandor are known for fast and precise work. If we want the information, we have to go for it immediately."

Michalovna narrowed her eyes. Again she looked at Levtan in a way that seemed strange to him. *As if her gaze wants to penetrate through my skull and read the thoughts in it.*

If the Terran could really do that, he was in grave danger. He put on a confidential smile. "As I said, it's your decision. I don't want to talk you into anything." The needles in his stomach miraculously multiplied and pricked relentlessly.

Now bite at last, you Arkonide Moolworm, Levtan thought angrily. He needed these three. No more worries about supplies, that's what they promised him: Kan'or for life. All he had to do was take control of them. He touched the finger with which he had brushed Crest's piece of jewelry. It was still tingling. What kind of device was it that the Arkonide guarded like the apple of his eye?

Michalovna looked away from him, shrugging slightly.

"Take us to your informant," Crest demanded.

Finally! "But only if you really want to," Levtan insisted. "If you have any concerns, you can always turn back. I have no intention of causing you any inconvenience." He saw how his words lowered the

vigilance of Crest's two companions. As always, he knew what to say to calm suspicious minds.

"Agreed," said Crest.

Levtan turned around and led the group back into the Web. "Leave the suits on," he suggested. "Maybe we'll take another way back later. Then I could show you the cultured crystal tanks. Truly extraordinary Zori crystals grow there in all imaginable colors. Also, there is an attached jewelry store that might please the ladies. My uncle Sarim runs it. He is a brother of Haklui Sarkatz."

Michalovna didn't look like she was particularly interested in a jewelry store. But she also raised no objection to Levtan's proposal.

Now I have you. He saw Michalovna's and Sloane's features relax. The comment on the intended way back and his fictitious relationship to the organizer of the C-sector made him seem even more trustworthy than before. With quick steps, he continued onward.

"Welcome to Sector D, my residential sector." He made a gesture of joy to Sloane by squeezing his fingers together. "Apart from Fagzetlu Jankalui, the section of a thousand gardens, this sector is the most beautiful. The holoprojections are of exquisite quality and there is a swimming pool two hundred meters long. Do people swim on your colonial planet?"

Sloane gave him a smile. "Yes, absolutely. Our planet has several large seas. You should see how beautiful they are. When you ride the waves, you feel the world belongs to you."

Levtan thought of Archetz, only briefly, then he forbade himself to think. Thinking about the unattainable world distracted him. He had to concentrate on his project.

"I couldn't imagine living in space day after day," Sloane burst out. "On a station where there is never wind, rain, or snow. What's that like for you? Have you ever been on a planet?"

"Why go to a planet? The holos and the simulations are enough

for me." One more lie. If it weren't for his fear, the eternal fear of being completely on his own, he would sign on and travel the universe as Izkat did.

They went through the Garlin tube, passing two T-junctions that led to docked ships. Levtan dispensed with a vehicle or a Faku. He chose a rarely used path through the Endorian, a side passage of the Garlin. While Sloane and Michalovna looked at the holographs on the corridor walls with slightly parted lips and wide eyes, Crest seemed unimpressed.

"The holos seem rather worse to me in this section," the Arkonide remarked as they walked along an extensive seascape with orange water, which flickered slightly from time to time.

"We're almost there," Levtan said in an attempt to distract him.

They approached the end of the tube, where there were hardly any other Mehandor to be seen. Around this time, life took place mostly on the garden platform or in private chambers. Only in a few Arkonide hours would the corridors fill with busy life.

"There's Unit Seven up there, the Fartonlu." He tried to put pride in his voice. The spider annex that awaited them at the end of the tunnel housed over five hundred dwelling units, of which Levtan's was one. It was neither the largest nor one of the most beautiful of the Web. Levtan liked it and liked to hide there when there was no business to do. But he was not proud of his home, even if it was one of the few to offer the rare view of the two suns that had to be simulated in other units of projections.

"It reminds me a little of a Saku honeycomb," said Michalovna.

"Saku honeycomb?" asked Levtan. "Sakus live in underground caverns."

"A translation error." Michalovna tapped her chest next to her shoulder. A translator must have been implanted there.

Levtan found himself staring at the Terran's breasts for a moment too long. He quickly turned away.

They went up an anti-grav platform, and Levtan stopped in front of the beige façade, into which several entrances led. He put his still slightly tingling finger on the sensor and the door slid open.

“Oh!” said Anne Sloane. “That’s... That...”

Sphere music of the Kantunlu resounded towards them and reminded Levtan why he loved this band especially. The ensemble struck a chord with him; the singer, Simtan, had a raspy voice and did not shy away from speaking unpleasant truths: “Beware of giving up on yourself, my brother; move away from the betrayal that will scorch you like the radiation of the cosmos until you forget who you are.”

“Turn off the music!” Levtan felt uncomfortable. The lyrics aroused his feelings of guilt. He turned to Sloane, who had saved his life. The Terran woman looked around his housing unit as if she were looking at a ghost. Her features seemed derailed. Did she despise what surrounded her? Was the sound of the water too loud for her?

Anger arose in him—anger at himself, but he unleashed it on the strangers who plunged him into such conflicts of conscience and loathed his dwelling unit with their jaws dropped.

“What is it?” he asked rudely. “Isn’t it tidy enough for you?”

“It’s beautiful,” said Sloane reverently. “It’s like walking into a photo.” Her gaze followed the blue Warun bird that appeared to be circling high above them.

Michalovna also stood in the doorway with widened eyes while Crest smiled next to her.

Then it dawned on Levtan: the two colonists had never seen a Mehandor dwelling before. What was commonplace for him must have seemed unreal to them.

Their homeland must be a barbaric place; their level of technology is far below ours. Don’t you have any atmospheric interior design there?

Sloane walked across the simulated golden-red rock floor to the

edge of the waterfall. The interior panorama suggested a steep drop of a good hundred meters. Below, the spray foamed. In the background, the view opened up to space with the two suns that seemed to be within reach. Turquoise blue sky stretched as far as the eye could see, as if they were not in space, but on a planet with a view of the ice world.

“How big is this apartment?” asked Michalovna, perplexed. She didn’t seem to have discovered the transitions from the floor to the wall.

“About sixty Dag-Darninlui.”

“Seventy square meters,” Crest chimed in. “Small, but impressive.” He nudged a virtual butterfly that had perched itself on his shoulder.

With a rapturous look in her eyes, Sloane inhaled. “It smells wonderful. What is that?”

“Marik extract. From bark.” Levtan was getting restless. “How about you take a look around while I get my informant?” he suggested quickly. “It’s better to discuss such things in private, no?”

Sloane nodded absently. Crest stepped forward and touched a reddish-brown stonerock, which turned out to be a wide lounger when touched. “Three-seater,” said Crest, accustomed to its function. The positronics reacted and transformed the couch into a three-seater couch group with just a few movements.

“Hurry, please,” demanded the Arkonide as he sat down.

Levtan nodded and walked to the sliding door. On the wall, behind his back, he took out three adhesive ovals from a secret compartment. His heart was beating treacherously loudly. Could he really do this? He thought of the incident on the outer wall of the Web and heard Michalovna shout again, “Anne, hold on to him!” The woman had to have special abilities; it was the only way to explain his salvation. In some way incomprehensible to him, she had influenced his rescue. Perhaps she had previously stopped Izkat during the failed theft.

That's exactly why she will be most important to the Empire, just like the old man, the dark voice within him said in defense of his evil plan. He hated that voice, but he still listened to it. *Think about the pay, Levtan. Don't be an idiot. Kan'or without end; no more problems. And it's not a crime if you lock them up. The Regent grants special powers. If you deliver them and they are accepted, you are a Tusant'or, a bounty hunter on behalf of the innermost circle. You even have to keep them in your apartment: it's your duty.*

His decision was made. "I'll be right back."

He was about to turn away when he saw Michalovna's expression change. She jumped forward. Surprised, Levtan flinched, and the door slid open silently. Michalovna wanted to grab him by the arm, but he dodged to the side. She continued, but this time he pushed her away, causing her to stagger back into the room and fall to the ground. She fell on her side.

Crest became attentive and stood up with a surprised expression on his face. Sloane turned to Michalovna. "Tatiana!"

"Close and lock!" commanded Levtan. His voice trembled.

"Please, don't do it!" he heard Michalovna shout through the narrowing gap. Then the door closed, impenetrable to all sound.

Levtan stopped. He propped himself up against the wall and breathed as hard as if he had just run a race. He thought he saw the big, pleading eyes of Michalovna in front of him.

"Please, don't do it." The words hurt like electric shocks. How had he betrayed himself? What had he done wrong?

Don't think about it, he rebuked himself. *You have them now; everything else is unimportant. Call the fleet and collect your reward.*

Levtan turned and set off. But the thought of Michalovna's pleading expression on his face wouldn't let go of him. It accompanied him with every step he took.

"Si wulkonlon ulop sa wulkonlon."

“Your breath is my breath.”

Mehandor

13.

Belinkhar

End of the Deadline

"Prepare access. Estimated operating time E minus ten. I don't want to see anyone around before, understand?" Belinkhar lowered her wrist. She knew that the security service was in position to be able to intervene quickly and bloodlessly.

Nervously, she looked around the tenth section of the garden section. The hustle and bustle provided privacy; it hid the emergency services, but at the same time it was a risk. Too many lives would be threatened if the situation escalated and the Terrans used force. Haklui Dartek was informed and would do everything in his power to ensure that no one in the vicinity of his sector was harmed.

"They're moving on," said Etztak, who watched Perry Rhodan, Tiara da Intral, and her advisor, John Marshall, on a holo above his wrist device. "They look desperate. Should I activate the acoustic monitoring?"

Belinkhar raised her hands in the negative. "I know what they're talking about. Crest da Intral, the Derengar, disappeared with two companions over three hours ago. I can't find him anywhere in the Web."

"Nowhere? What does that mean?" Her shadow continued to watch the holo. His voice sounded pressed as he spoke; he could only hide with difficulty how dissatisfied he was with the whole situation.

"I don't know. Maybe he followed a young female to her dwelling," Belinkhar joked without finding it remotely funny. She took a deep breath. *I myself am as nervous as a soldier of the fleet before their first deployment.* Her hand slid over the bulge at her hip, where she carried a weapon under her long Hasan jacket. It was

uncomfortable. Although it barely had any weight, the weapon felt as though it were pulling her down with every step.

Etztak noticed her stealthy gesture. “You shouldn’t have given the order to hand out weapons, Belinkhar. That’s unusual.”

“Didn’t you say yourself that Rhodan was not to be trusted?” she countered.

Her shadow was silent.

“What are the three of them doing?” Belinkhar changed the subject. She did not believe in the fairy tale that Rhodan would simply surrender and pay the Seventh. But time was running out and Rhodan had made no move to return to the *Tosoma*. Maybe she was wrong about him.

“His advisor keeps closing his eyes and concentrating. It seems to be some kind of ritual for reflection among the Terrans. He thinks quite a bit.”

This struck Belinkhar as strange. She looked at the man with the dark hair, who was standing intently next to a blossoming Hantu tree, illuminated by its own light. At his side, Rhodan made reassuring arm movements in the direction of the Arkonide.

Belinkhar stroked her forehead with a gesture of astonishment. “Tiara da Intral is beside herself. I’d like to know where Crest is.” Robberies or kidnappings on the Web were rare. There were thefts from time to time, but most of them were solved within a very short time.

Did someone find out that Crest was indeed an oppositionist and arrest him in order to betray him to the fleet? She did not express the thought out loud that he had given Etztak fuel for new accusations. After all, her shadow did not trust the clan to the same extent as she did.

A quiet voice spoke up, as if she had activated an extra sense like the higher-ranking Arkonides had: *It must have been someone from outside the clan. Perhaps a “Gartinlu,” a stranger.*

It annoyed her that she hadn't monitored Crest better in the first place. Since he seemed to be the only Arkonide aboard the *Tosoma* besides Thora, he was important.

"Tighten the circle!" she ordered the Haklui forces.

Etztak wrung his hands. It was clear to him that he would have preferred to be away sector-wide, but as her shadow, he had to be near her. Always. Belinkhar didn't mind causing a little inconvenience.

They worked their way up to the group. Belinkhar led the way, Etztak following her with his head tucked down. A good ten men and women of the Haklui Guard did the same unobtrusively. Belinkhar had repeatedly assured himself that the three strangers had no idea of their presence. She had to strike unexpectedly.

On the holo, she saw the desperate face of Tiara da Intral. If the Arkonide was so worried about Crest, why hadn't she called the Haklui Guard? *Isn't that proof that they want to flee? If they inteded to pay, they could turn to us with confidence.* She spoke the thought out loud.

Etztak pondered. "We are a few steps away, and the ship will be repaired at any moment. I think we were wrong. Even if these Terrans wanted to, how could they escape? We have encircled them."

On Belinkhar's wristband device, Haklui Sarkatz spoke up. "Matriarch, the repair is complete. The trade is legally binding."

"Thank you!" Belinkhar made a connection with Jeston, the Kanwenlu, who led the Web guard. Access approved! Ask the Terrans to come with you to the vacant housing units. I'll take care of da Intral and Rhodan personally."

"Understood."

It was not Belinkhar's first mission of this kind, but she was still more insecure than ever before.

A loud alarm sounded over the garden platform. The Mehandor,

who were already familiar with the sound, took care of the visitors, who were frightened by it. With reassuring words, they pulled the astronauts aside. Within a few moments, the area around Belinkhar was emptied. The crowd closed five paces around Tiara da Intral, Rhodan, and Marshall, forming an island whose center was the Arkonide and her two companions.

Belinkhar looked at Rhodan, who returned her gaze. There was a harshness in his gray eyes that frightened her.

The man will not surrender. She knew it with a certainty that seemed immovable. Although they were only ten steps away from Rhodan, she expected the impossible. She drew her gun. The guards pushed out of the crowd. The circle around da Intral, Rhodan, and Marshall tightened like a noose. “Rhodan will flee!”

“But,” Etztak began. “How?” He fell silent. The dim light of the double sun illuminated the scene in front of them like a performance on a stage.

Out of nowhere, a tall, dark man in Terran clothing appeared. He stretched out his arms. Rhodan, Marshall, and da Intral reached for him. They came close together.

Etztak stopped. Like a board tilted forward, he remained on the spot. Belinkhar slowed down. Her thoughts ran wild. A person out of nowhere! The damn guy had appeared like a holoapp! Was he even real?

“What’s that?” asked Etztak. “Where...” He fell silent.

“Stop!” shouted Belinkhar. She didn’t know what was happening, but something was going on. With her weapon raised, she aimed at Perry Rhodan, but she hesitated too long.

From one moment to the next, da Intral, Rhodan, and Marshall were gone. Red-gold light illuminated the spot where they had just stood. It was empty, as if the guards and the Web leadership had suffered a collective delusion together.

Belinkhar saw the confusion on the faces of the guards. Her heart

was racing in her chest and she looked around searchingly. What did this mean?

Jeston spun in circles, his loose black robe fluttering. Due to his unusually tall stature, he was able to look over the crowd. His sharply cut face with narrow eyes showed bewilderment. “Look for them!”

This can’t be true!

Rhodan and his companions were gone! Just gone!

“Like ghosts,” Etztak said from behind her. He believed as little in spirits as he did the goodness of the Regent, but he couldn’t think of a better answer to the incredible event.

“No!” Belinkhar curled her fingers into fists. She remembered rumors she had heard during her time on the *Tus’rak*. “Jeston! Have the force fields activated! Everyone! Listen! Try to support the internal fields! Divert energy if necessary! No ship may launch or dock! Alarm status!”

“Of course!”

Etztak scratched his trimmed beard. “What does that mean, Belinkhar? What do the force fields have to do with it?”

“Later! We must begin the pursuit! Surely they won’t get far! Run, Etztak!”

Etztak seemed pitiful. “But where to?”

Belinkhar turned on her holo and activated the search function. “We’ll find out in a moment.”

14.

Cyr Aescunnar

The Tortoise and the Hare

Aescunnar felt demotivated. His idea, which had given him the impetus to continue following Hetcher, did not seem to work.

Dejected, he looked around. He had removed the two unnecessary seats while driving. They lay behind him between sharp-edged basalt boulders, two signs of human civilization that were barely visible in the stony desert. He sighed.

It would also have been too nice if this primitive trick had actually worked: throw everything overboard to increase speed.

He had tried his hand at the software again and again in the past few days. He was left with a thin hope that saved him from giving up. Maybe the Mars mobile would get faster if he expanded more things. This was unlikely, but not impossible. Since capitulation was out of the question, he continued to work doggedly.

Armed with an electric screwdriver, he tampered with some casing on the side wall. Above him, the dome was open and he could stand up if he wanted. The spacesuit hindered him. The model, which was primitive compared to Arkonide technology, left him little freedom of movement. He longingly remembered his flight over the surface of Titan in an Arkonide protective suit. How pleasant and transparent it had felt, how easy it had been to steer.

Ferron technology was completely different. The thick gloves robbed him of all sensitivity, and the electric screwdriver had already slipped out of his fingers several times. The tool was designed for Ferron hands, which were more compact and stronger than his own. The button to trigger the rotation needed a lot of pressure, which hurt his joints.

“Warning!” came the voice of the computer. “Casing C is coming

loose!”

“That’s what it’s supposed to do.”

“Warning! You could lose the item. Stop immediately and carry out maintenance.”

“Shut up,” Aescunnar grumbled into his helmet. It was exhausting enough to concentrate, and he didn’t need the voice of this pesky device to distract him further.

“Warning…”

Aescunnar turned around and turned off the sound. He wouldn’t be able to hear Louanne Riembau either, but since he didn’t plan to have another conversation with her, it wasn’t a big loss.

The machine’s protest stopped. Aescunnar turned back to the casing when he saw a movement outside the vehicle in the corner of his eye.

He blinked. Surely it was just dust. What else could it be?

He wanted to dedicate himself to increasing the vehicle’s speed again when he saw the movement a second time. Irritated, he paused and stared at a gray boulder. The sun was gradually setting, and the bright light of the sky gave way to a cool blue-gray.

What was that? He thought, confused. He recalled the moment. Something had scurried from stone to stone to the side of the mobile like an animal.

“Just my imagination,” he murmured.

In his mind, he scolded himself for being a fool. Generations of probes had searched Mars for liquid water and life and found nothing. But he, Cyr Aescunnar, only had to travel to the Red Planet once to find an animal scurrying about.

Presumably, it had been a particularly conspicuous formation of dust that the wind had driven past and from which his tired eyes had created a familiar shape. Although the Mars mobile was driving

itself, Aescunnar's sleep was restless and far too shallow to really recharge. The efforts of the last few days had left their mark. It was surprising that he hadn't had hallucinations much earlier. He needed a break.

Aescunnar sat back, closed the dome, and activated an element on the display on his wrist. A straw came out of the inner wall of the helmet. Deftly, he snapped at it with his mouth and drank with careful sips. He had to pull himself together not to take more than he needed. The water tank in the suit knapsack was almost empty, and the supplies in the vehicle were also running out. Reluctantly, his lips let go of the straw. The plastic tube returned into the helmet.

Despite his hunger, Aescunnar was not in the mood for the nutritious porridge, which he could eat in the same way. When he was back at Bradbury Base, he would eat a steak. But first he had to catch up with Hetcher and, if necessary, overwhelm him. At some point, he had to speed up if he dismantled enough.

"I can do it," he said aloud. It was good to hear his own voice in silence. Ahead of him lay another gloomy Martian night that wouldn't even offer the respite of intoxicatingly beautiful rock formations or glittering dust devils.

Aescunnar turned back to the casing, which he had almost completely replaced. Shouldn't he give up and repent? He shook his head. It was too late for that.

"I'll catch up with Hetcher. I'm sure I'll be able to catch him soon, and if I have to, I'll knock him unconscious and carry him back. Unless he talks and explains what this is all about."

It didn't help. First he had to dismantle the casing, then he could see more. After a brief break, he got back to work. Carefully, he lifted the gray plastic and bent it to the side. The metal underneath was emblazoned with a combination of letters and numbers stamped in black: MMV-3.

Aescunnar slipped the casing out of his hand. The serial number has been obscured again. He cursed, glanced at the display. He had

still not managed to increase the vehicle's speed. There seemed to be no lower limit.

His last hope died. Hetcher's vehicle remained at an unreachable, constant distance. Should he try to crack the software again? Without codes, it was hopeless, and Louanne Riembau would certainly not help him.

Absent-mindedly, his hand ran his hand over the casing. "The serial number," he said aloud.

A thought occurred to him. Others quickly joined it. Electrified, Aescunnar straightened up. Yes, it had to work! The new idea would be his salvation! It was simple and effective.

He turned forward, towards the display. Through his numerous attempts to outwit the software, he now knew the vehicle's program very well.

"MMV-3!" He grinned and called up the menu, in which the serial number was noted. "Let's see what happens when we make an MMV-2 out of you!"

The Mars mobile of the second version was smaller than the MMV-3 and had wheels of smaller diameter. In terms of software, both models were compatible. Aescunnar was now sure that the speed lock was linked to the number of revolutions of the wheels. Supposedly smaller tires would allow his model to make more revolutions. But since the tires remained the same size, he would progress faster!

He single-mindedly exchanged the numbers and confirmed several times that his statement was correct. It only took a few seconds for the system to react and the speed to increase noticeably.

"Hallelujah!" exclaimed Aescunnar, sinking back into the seat. That was done. On the display, both vehicles began approaching each other.

He was getting closer meter by meter. The beetle-shaped vehicles had become snails, and his snail had definitely seen the lettuce leaf

that magically attracted it. Soon, he would catch up with Hetcher. With a smile, he thought of the story of the tortoise and the hare who had raced each other. The hare was faster, of course, but the tortoise was the smarter one. He had positioned a second tortoise at the finishing point, which looked confusingly similar to him, and deceived the hare.

Aescunnar didn't have a second Mars mobile at hand to station in front of Hecher, but there was one thing he could do: cheat. If that's what you wanted to call it.

He grinned. He liked the word "outwit" better. He had outwitted the speed regulation by pretending to secure another model. Soon, he would be reaching Hetcher.

15.

Hetcher

Tharsis Montes

The colors swirled in front of his closed eyes and joy flowed through him. Hetcher felt his heart in his chest as it pumped warm blood through his veins. In front of him, the Tharsis Montes, those incomprehensibly beautiful and gigantically high volcanoes, rose steadily. All three called for him, lured him, charmed his senses.

Hetcher felt as if he were throwing off the shackles of his previous existence like an old skin that had done its duty. He was free. Once and for all. Bound up with the souls of Mars, who loved and understood him.

“Come, come, come,” the three mountains called to him.

Hetcher gestured wildly. He was on his way. Soon, he would reach her, and everything else was inconsequential.

He looked at the display next to the steering wheel. Aescunnar’s Mars mobile was depicted as a beam that lagged behind him. Aescunnar had stopped, right at the point where Hetcher had left the route. To Hetcher’s delight, relief came.

“He’s staying behind!” he shouted to the three mountains with stormy gestures.

The three of them spoke in one voice: “That’s a good thing. He is deaf. He must stay behind.”

“Cyr is extraordinarily sensitive,” Hetcher defended the historian. He wondered about himself. Why did he defend him? Did he like him more than he wanted to admit?

“His journey is over,” said the Tharsis Montes. “It’s as it should be.”

“Yes.” Hetcher closed his eyes again, surrendered to the colors and feelings of happiness. As a child, he had once been fishing alone with his father. They had had long tar sticks with lines that they had thrown into the lake. United in silence with his father, it had seemed to him as if the older Ferron could understand him and knew what he looked like. They had smiled at each other, and Hetcher had been happy. Not as happy as at this moment; nevertheless, the memory left a warm feeling that combined with the sensations of anticipation and oneness. The shield volcanoes had chosen him. They called him because he was different and they needed him.

“Hetcher,” whispered the volcanoes. The bright colors in front of Hetcher’s eyelids faded. Darkness spread. “Look at the display, Hetcher. He’s still following you!”

Blinking, Hetcher looked at the beam. Aescunnar had resumed his journey, chasing after him.

“No,” he gestured with weak movements. His arms felt like he was standing in the torture chamber of Bradbury Base—the gym—wearing weights filled with sand on his joints.

“It can’t be!” The voices flared up like a storm. The bright sky above Hetcher seemed to darken at the sound. “He’s deaf. Do something!”

“What can I do?”

“Stop him. It doesn’t matter how.”

Hetcher froze. Do something to Aescunnar? The terrestrial man who had written the translation program for him? Hetcher pretended not to hear the angry voices. Any impact would mean massive damage to Aescunnar. He was dependent on the Mars mobile. What could Hetcher have done besides attack? Any form of violence, including directed against the Mars mobile, would be Ascunnar’s end.

“Stop him!” the volcanoes demanded again.

Hetcher's elation faded. Fear spread through him. He sensed that the mountains would be upset if he didn't stop Aescunnar from following him. In addition, for the first time since the start of the chase, he understood what it felt like when the other did not come forward.

A guilty conscience stirred in him. Aescunnar had been nice to him and made an effort. He had rescued him in the storm, even though Hetcher was convinced that the rescue mission had been unnecessary. He wouldn't have died out there; he felt that. But from Aescunnar's point of view, he owed him a life.

"He can't catch up with me," Hetcher reassured the Tharsis Montes. "Our vehicles are exactly the same speed, and the maximum speed is fixed for safety reasons. The barrier cannot be removed with on-board tools. He poses no danger to me, only to himself."

The volcanoes seemed calm, their voices silent.

Hetcher relaxed. He did not try to contact Aescunnar again, but he hoped that the Terran would come to his senses. If the other man died because of Hetcher, it would weigh heavily on him.

The vehicle worked its way steadily up the slight incline. A few minutes passed as Hetcher listened to the stories of the stones under the wheels.

Then the calm was abruptly interrupted. "He's getting closer!" cried the volcanoes. "He's getting closer!"

Hetcher was suddenly no longer sure if it was only the volcanoes that were calling. It didn't feel like three voices, but a thousand. The stones of the plain had united with the Tharsis Montes to form a chanting chorus.

Quickly, he looked back. Behind him, he could see a tiny, glittering cloud of dust at a distance of three kilometers. He looked ahead at the display. Aescunnar's vehicle was catching up! That was impossible.

Desperate, Hetcher shook his head. Had Aescunnar managed to bypass the software lock that limited speed? Or was his own Mars mobile defective?

He hastily checked the systems but could not find any restrictions. The computer confirmed that everything was fine. The vehicle was operating as it should.

And yet, slowly, but inexorably, his pursuer crept closer.

“It is easier to break an atom than a prejudice.”

Terran

16.

Perry Rhodan

On the Run

Rhodan stood with one leg in a pond immediately after the jump and threatened to fall into the water lengthwise. Thora grabbed his arm.

Gratefully, Rhodan leaned on her until he found his footing again and was able to get out of the pond. He turned to a group of trees that resembled elms studded with flowers. A good half dozen blocked the direct view of the next park path.

In front of Rhodan, Marshall crouched on his knees with his hands pressed against his temples and gasped. His boots dug deep into blue moss, and only with difficulty did he seem to stay on his feet in this position. He must have formed a link with Ras Tschubai, who had expended his parapowers.

Tschubai was even worse; he lay crooked in the meadow, as if plagued by cramps. Rhodan could see a thin film of sweat everywhere on his dark skin.

He quickly went to him. “Ras!”

“Pull him deeper under the trees,” Thora ordered. There are cameras everywhere.”

They had landed a bit off one of the main paths. A sluggish stream of Mehandor and visitors rolled past them less than four steps away. When they had entered the garden platform for the first time, Rhodan’s heart had contracted painfully with excitement and amazement at the numerous alien beings. At the moment, he no longer had an eye for them. All that mattered was the health of his friends.

Thora helped him to pull Tschubai into the privacy of a tree-like

plant. Marshall got up on his own strength and dragged himself forward. He wanted to lean against the trunk, but Thora pushed his hand away.

"You'd better not. Ratu trees secrete sticky sap."

"Ras, do you hear me?" Rhodan bent over his friend. Guilt spread through him and gnawed at his insides with sharp teeth. Only a few hours ago, Tschubai had exhausted himself completely when the nuclear fire on board the *Tosoma* had raged. Through his courageous efforts, he had achieved a lot, but it had come at a cost. Maybe too high a cost. Certainly, he had not been able to jump off the *Tosoma* without pushing his limits. "You shouldn't have done that!"

Tschubai's face was pale, and his dark skin looked washed out. Sweat covered his forehead in beads, and his eyes looked sunken in their sockets. His grin seemed distorted to Rhodan, as though he were in pain.

"Not really. But Reg would have given me hell if I had left you hanging..."

Thora looked restlessly over her shoulder towards the path. "We have to get out. Our last location is less than eight hundred meters away. If we don't leave immediately, we're done for!"

"Ras, can you keep going?"

The Sudanese man nodded. Marshall and Rhodan pulled him to his feet, where he swayed like a drunken sailor.

"Slowly," he pleaded. You could see how hard he was trying and what it cost him. A dry cough shook him like a flu patient. He leaned on Rhodan and, step by step, they went on their way under flower-shaped treetops.

Thora stared angrily back in the direction they had come from before the jump. "That Belinkhar! Those treacherous space thieves! That's what happens when you trust them! This is exactly what my people warn against! I should have listened to Geran da Mirtal's

wise words and let them be a warning to me! Those damned redheads have no right to kill us."

"Yes, they do," Marshall objected.

Rhodan was irritated by the sound of his voice. Marshall didn't just interrupt Thora's sentence; he seemed just as angry as she was. His otherwise calm face had taken on a grim expression. His dark eyes and posture made a clear statement.

He stood up in front of Thora as if she were a teenager who had carelessly lit her cigarette on the stove and could have burned down the family home. "You'd better listen to our people, Thora. We say that it's more difficult to change prejudice than it is to split the atom. Perhaps Mr. Mirtal and Mr. Einstein should have met for a coffee to exchange ideas."

Thora stared at Marshall, dumbfounded. Even though she had been living among humans for a long time, she had rarely been treated so ruthlessly. "Explain!" There was an expression in her eyes that Rhodan didn't like.

Marshall sighed, still holding a hand to his temple. "Excuse me, Thora, but my head feels as if I were under the *Tosoma* at the start, and your prejudices against the Mehandor are incomprehensible to me. I was able to read the mind of Jeston, the commander of the Web Guard, before jumping. The *Tosoma* is repaired, it is capable of interstellar travel, and the trade is completed. The Seventh is therefore due. Belinkhar has every right in the universe to claim it. To scold the Mehandor because of this defies logic."

Rhodan understood. His plan had failed. "Then it is impossible to bring the crew on board peacefully. We could only do it by force of arms, and that's exactly what we can't use."

"That's right," Marshall confirmed. "I also used the time in search of Crest to capture the thoughts of the Mehandor around us. If we use armed force, our rights are forfeit, and entirely! Then Belinkhar can do with us as she pleases. She could take possession of us and the *Tosoma*. Forever. We would be serfs."

Thora pursed her lips and listened. Tschubai's breathing slowly calmed. He managed to raise his hand and wipe the sweat from his forehead with his sleeve.

Marshall's point made sense to Rhodan. If just one of the team overreacted, their chances of coming out of it deteriorated dramatically. He lifted the arm radio to his mouth.

"Reg? Announcement! We must surrender, do you hear? We..." He fell silent. The connection to the *Tosoma* couldn't be established. Again, he activated the device. "Reg?"

What was going on? He looked around searchingly, stepped to the edge of the canopy. His gaze slid up to the transparent ceiling that stretched across the garden. He noticed how milky the air above the garden platform suddenly looked. As if, in addition to the impressive construction, a force field stretched over them.

Thora pulled him back by the arm. "What are you doing? Do you want to bring the Mehandor to us?"

"Belinkhar!" He suppressed a string of swear words. "She's found out we have mutants! The Web is sealed off with protective shields!"

"That can't be." There was contempt in Thora's voice. "Paragifts are largely unknown in the Milky Way. The Mehandor can't know anything about it."

"I have something to say too," Ras said to Rhodan. "Prejudice is the snooty receptionist in the antechamber of reason." It was unusual for the thoughtful teleporter to speak up. And even more unusual that he did so with such a sharp remark.

"Ras," Rhodan chided him. Thora was worried about Crest, and it was certainly wrong to take out their own tension on the Arkonide, even if Thora's prejudices and lack of cooperation in terms of information were severely trying. He grabbed Thora by the arm. "What Ras means is that your prejudices against the Mehandor cloud your otherwise sharp mind. You must not underestimate the Mehandor, and Belinkhar in particular!"

Thora gave him a venomous look. “Have you become my teacher, Rho—”

“There!” said Marshall. He pointed to two uniformed Mehandor with weapons in their hands, pushing their way through the crowd in their direction. They didn’t seem to have discovered the group yet.

“Ras, can you go faster?” Rhodan gripped the teleporter tighter.

Tschubai did not answer. He limped off, tightly holding onto Rhodan and Marshall. They gained more and more distance.

“Let’s try to make our way to the *Tosoma*,” Rhodan suggested. As required by the Mehandor, they had not taken any weapons with them on the Web, so they would not be tempted to use them. “Maybe everyone made it back on board after all.”

And if not, he at least wanted to know that Thora, Tschubai, and Marshall were safely on board. He was ready to surrender himself to the Mehandor if there was no other way. For a moment, he considered surrendering, but he immediately dismissed the idea. It was still possible to escape back to the ship. All they needed was a little luck.

Maybe Reg is right. Maybe I’m just doing it for Thora, a quiet, implacable voice spoke up.

As little as he knew about the Arkonide mission, he did not want Thora to fail. The Arkonide had to be on the *Tosoma* so that she would not become a part of the Seventh and thus be stuck on the web. Quite apart from that, he was worried about Bull’s reaction. If he told Bull to abandon the *Tosoma*, perhaps his friend would overreact and bring doom upon the crew. He had to talk to him.

“Go on!” he urged his friends.

“Follow me,” Thora demanded. She pointed to the crowded path. Not far away, a sign in Mehandor showed the word “Exit.” In an adjacent dome, Rhodan recognized a market that sold a wide range of cloths, clothing, and headgear, among other things. Light blue

plastic tarpaulins were stretched over the individual stands, cutting off the view of the cameras.

“I see.” He ran after her. If they managed to camouflage themselves quickly enough, they might have a chance of getting into the access tunnel leading to the *Tosoma* unnoticed.

“Daslon umastik Lantanlon”

“Necessity reveals the core.”

Mehandor

17.

Tatiana Michalovna

In the Trap

Michalovna jumped up and rushed towards the door. The gap narrowed and the bright light became a thin strip, before disappearing entirely. “Prakljat’je!” she cursed. “Fucking shit!” She fought the impulse to kick the barrier, which looked like a rocky landscape.

“What happened?” Crest stepped up beside her, touching her shoulder. “Tatiana, what’s wrong?”

Sloane looked as if someone had unexpectedly poured a bucket of water over her. “I don’t understand...”

Michalovna brushed off Crest’s hand; her skin burned. She felt that she had abandoned her friend and could not stand his closeness. If she had been faster, she could have prevented Levtan’s betrayal.

“He’s going to betray us to the Arkonide fleet!”

“What?” Something seemed to break inside Crest; Michalovna saw it in his face, but it didn’t stop there. Crest slumped as if he were a puppet whose strings had been cut by a malevolent puppeteer. He backed away and leaned heavily against the wall, his head lowered to his chest. His otherwise full-bodied voice sounded pitiful. “That... That can’t be true.”

“Unfortunately, it is.” The bitterness in Michalovna expanded. “I should have known. In his mind, it was clear to read. He believes that the Regent will pay him handsomely if he betrays us. He wants to use it to get money or means of payment for drugs. He’s been looking for money from the beginning so he can buy Kan’or.”

Sloane’s eyes narrowed. “Why didn’t you realize it earlier,

Tatiana? You were in charge! You should have read his mind much earlier! Why didn't you warn us?"

Crest didn't say anything. He looked faint, as if the long-overcoming cancer had unexpectedly returned from one second to the next. For the first time since receiving the activator, his face looked sunken.

Michalovna ran her fingers over her temples. "I don't know why, Anne. But I couldn't see anything in his thoughts. It was as if a curtain had been drawn over his intentions. It was only in the last moments, before Levtan left, that the fabric fell aside and I got a glimpse. Perhaps it has to do with the diminishing effect of the drug. As long as the drug is in effect, a telepath can't read anything."

Yes, when she said it out loud, it seemed logical to Michalovna. *If only I had told Crest and Anne earlier that I couldn't read Levtan's mind. But there was no way. If there's one thing that was drilled into at Lakeside, it's to never, never, never talk about our paragifts in the presence of strangers...*

Sloane put her hands on his hips. "A nice excuse, really! And so practical. So, it's the drug's fault."

"This is the end," Crest muttered, without looking at the two women. "If we meet the Regent in this way, he will have us eliminated before anyone knows that Thora and I are alive."

The feelings of guilt sat like spikes in her skin, yet Michalovna became angry at Sloane's accusations. "An excuse? Watch how you treat me, Anne. I'm not your punching bag like Tako Kakuta!"

Silence spread among the captives, and only the dull noise of the waterfall simulation created a backdrop for their predicament. Sloane looked at her, wide-eyed, with red spots on her face. Michalovna could feel her fear of being handed over to the Empire and never seeing Earth again. For a moment, pity rose in her, then defiance prevailed.

No matter what she's afraid of, she doesn't have the right to treat me

like that. I can't help it that Levtan hid his thoughts from me. He could just as well have happened to be paragifted himself or have had a slightly anti-mutant gift.

Sloane pressed her lips together. "Okay, I'm sorry. I overreacted. I... I thought Levtan was a nice guy. Obviously, I have a knack for trusting the wrong people." Her voice betrayed a self-contempt that was not appropriate to the situation.

Michalovna laughed dryly; she couldn't help it, even if she didn't feel like laughing at all. "That's what scammers do, Anne: they're excellent at gaining trust. In a way, that's their job, believe me. And it wasn't just you who he fooled, was it?"

Sloane nodded hesitantly.

Crest raised his head. He straightened up, his muscles tense. The color returned to his cheeks. "This cannot be allowed to happen!"

"It won't be." In Sloane's voice, the brittle dryness returned. "Step aside. The door must be able to be opened."

Crest and Michalovna made way for her. Sloane closed her eyes and concentrated. Several seconds passed in tense silence. Michalovna kept her eyes fixed on the exit. Should she offer Sloane to support her with a parablock?

"Just a few more moments." Sloane didn't seem to need any support.

Michalovna took another step back. Her respect for the telekinetic grew. After overcoming her initial shock, Sloane acted quickly and competently. If she actually got the door open, it meant she would have worked with surgical precision.

There was a faint clacking sound. The door opened a bit. Crest threw himself against it and pushed it open. In the middle of the red, rocky landscape, there was a rapidly growing exit.

Sloane turned to face them, her hands trembling. Her face was flushed, as if she had eaten raw chili powder, but the eyes showed the same clarity and determination as Crest's.

“Where has this traitor gone, Tatiana? Let’s get him!”

“Be like a moon; keep your dark side.”

Terran

18.

Perry Rhodan

Confessions

The market overwhelmed Rhodan with its impressions. Fabrics and colors shone and shimmered. Some contained fragrances that covered the square under the dome like a cloud of a thousand different odors. More than a hundred differently dressed Mehandor crowded between the stalls surrounded by plants, acting, laughing, scolding. At the same time, the imminent danger of being discovered at any time lurked in the background.

The blood throbbed in Rhodan's temples. The air seemed to shimmer before his eyes; dark dots danced in the dim light under the tarpaulins. Every single Mehandor could recognize them, betray them, perhaps be a Guardian of the Web or alert others to their presence.

"Over here!" Thora called out. She had several colorful jackets on her arm, as well as four blue-red headdresses with silver threads.

Tschubai was able to walk on his own again. He stumbled alongside Rhodan and Marshall. Thora distributed the garments as she walked on as a matter of course, as if she had bought the goods and not stolen them. In the hustle and bustle, hardly anyone looked at them.

"Thief!" roared a voice behind them.

"Put this on!" Thora hissed. The Arkonide held back Marshall, who wanted to go faster. "Don't do that, Marshall. No one pointed a finger at us. As long as we behave normally, we won't stand out."

Rhodan squeezed himself into a jacket that was too short for him and could not be closed over his stomach. Still, it was more inconspicuous than his monochrome combination. Most of the Mehandor wore bright colors, some even popping ones, which

seemed to glow from the inside out like the flowers in the garden. Although they would not pass as Mehandor even with the changed clothing, they would perhaps pass as other space travelers with a humanoid form. In addition, the headgear would protect them from direct facial recognition by cameras.

Thora put a hat on him, which seemed incredibly ridiculous to Rhodan. But he saw two Mehandor nearby wearing similar headdresses.

Tschubai and Marshall also put on their stolen goods. They walked purposefully, but not too fast, through the crowd, along stalls with clothes, shoes, and the craziest underwear, in the direction that led them to the *Tosoma*.

After a few meters, the market dome ended, separated by its own milky shimmering force field. In front of the market were a good three hundred meters of garden platform before they would reach the junction to the tunnels.

Rhodan felt miserable when he thought of it. Their escape was hopeless. The guards merely had to wait for them at the junction. Their only hope was a teleportation that would allow them to neatly bypass the Haklui forces and get deep into the tunnel.

Guards will also certainly be posted in front of the Tosoma.

“Ras, can you jump?” he asked with little hope.

“Sorry, Perry. I’m through.” Tschubai lowered his gaze. Like Rhodan and Marshall, he tried to make himself as small as possible in order to remain inconspicuous among the generally smaller Mehandor. Due to his deep gait and sunken shoulders, he also seemed discouraged and at the end of his strength. “If there are force fields. I might be able to do a few meters, but not through them. I can’t take responsibility for frying us by getting us stuck halfway through.”

Thora huddled close to them. She, too, kept looking around furtively. “There must be structural gaps. A force field does not allow matter to pass through, and a few thousand Mehandor live on

this station. Belinkhar cannot completely seal off the individual sectors, which would lead to mass panic."

"But the junctions will be guarded," Marshall said. "I'm sure that's why we haven't seen a guard so far. They're waiting up there, at the transition to the garden platform."

"Okay." Rhodan rallied. "Ras, John, you're forming a group. If possible, form a block and teleport together through the next structural gap. Thora and I will let ourselves drift back to the garden platform with the crowd and try to reach the next gap at the junction to the tunnel. That's where we meet and see what happens. If we don't show up and you have the opportunity, go ahead and don't wait for us."

Marshall didn't seem to like the idea of leaving Rhodan and Thora alone. There were fine wrinkles on his forehead, and his eyebrows were furrowed. Nevertheless, he did not object. After the last jump, he and Tschubai did not have the stamina for a strenuous chase.

"All right," said Tschubai. "Maybe I'll be able to jump through the structural gap."

A large gate with ornamental animals that vaguely resembled dragons came ever closer. A good ten Mehandor fit through the width. At the gate were several Haklui forces who looked around vigilantly. They wore uniform light green robes that were tight and had a symbol on the shoulder that looked like a triple Möbius strip.

Rhodan pulled himself together. He caught up with Thora, while Marshall and Tschubai dropped back a bit. The guards did not stop every Mehandor. If they were very lucky, they would be able to pass in the crowd.

"Join the family!" cried Thora.

Rhodan nodded. A good ten Mehandor of different ages walked in front of them as a group in similar clothing. They squeezed close behind the last members—an old, beardless man whose short red hair was streaked with silver strands, and a young woman with a

dreamy look in a wide, luminous dress.

“Bend down!” hissed Thora.

Rhodan went down on his knees. They stood out simply because they were not built delicately enough. On impulse, he grabbed Thora’s hand and pulled her into the middle of the extended family.

“Hey!” grumbled the old Mehandor. The girl looked at them blankly.

“Excuse me,” said Rhodan, raising his hands reassuringly. He pulled his chin to his chest, hid under his hat.

The Mehandor looked at them with hostility, and a child pricked Rhodan’s thigh with a pointed finger.

“Get out!”

“All right.” Rhodan ran faster, pushing his way through the extended family and the gate. He did not dare to check on the guards. Thora did not raise her head either. The edges of their hats touched each other as they passed through the gate one after the other. They had walked perhaps five meters and left the Mehandor family behind when the howling alarm went off.

“That’s meant for us!” Thora trembled. “There are two guards coming! They’ll see us in a moment!”

Rhodan looked around frantically. Next to them along the path stretched several huge pools of water in the garden. One of them constantly changed its color from orange to purple. A one-and-a-half-meter-high ball of water sprayed out of a long tube in the middle and towered over the waves like a rising sun. Like the color of water, it changed its shape sometimes into a star, sometimes into a flower, then back into a sphere. The pond did not look deep, maybe half a meter. It was hard to see, as the color of the water meant the bottom was hardly visible.

Rhodan pushed Thora to the pond and pointed to a wide range of plants at its edge. “First behind this plant, then jump!”

They departed from the path together, gliding like two lovers behind a plant that consisted of red flowers and smelled intoxicating. As soon as they were out of sight, they plunged into the water. It was warm, a good twenty degrees, but the wetness still felt uncomfortable in the clothes. They knelt close to each other so that their bodies would be covered from the outside.

Through the water, they saw the dark outline of a guard appear. They held their breath. The guard stopped, presumably turning in circles, before continuing on his way.

Rhodan relaxed. “That was close.”

Thora spoke softly, the water almost drowning out her words. “I’m sorry to put you in this situation, Rhodan.”

“Really?” Rhodan had his doubts. “When you asked me weeks ago to take soldiers with me on the journey and not artists, did you already know what was going to happen? I thought I had something to offer the Regent: dynamic Terrans, an alliance that benefits both sides. We provide volunteers who come to Arkon. He accepts our extensive independence. He has so many colonies, doesn’t he? Why would he stand in Terra’s way instead of using our potential?”

He was silent for a moment, thinking of his hopes. His encounter with Thora and Crest had opened up completely new perspectives. Arkonide, Ferron, and Topsidan knowledge was rapidly changing Earth’s society. It had made the founding of the Terran Union possible. But Rhodan was under no illusions: they were only at the beginning of their path to a better future. Humanity needed more than a few crumbs of knowledge from technically superior cultures in order not to stumble. Arkon, the Great Empire, Rhodan had hoped, could become humanity’s mentor, its protector. That’s why he had ventured into Arkon. Justly?

“You weren’t honest with me from the beginning, Thora. You’ve let me down.”

Thora’s red eyes looked at him angrily. “Oh, yes? You knew in advance that there was something wrong with our story, that we weren’t stranded on Earth entirely voluntarily.”

“I had a hunch,” Rhodan admitted. “But I thought that by attaining immortality, Crest had made up for your transgressions. After all, he has gained something for the Arkonides that cannot be overestimated.”

There was an expression of incomprehension on Thora’s face. “You’re a bigger dreamer than I thought, Rhodan. Immortality has nothing to do with the Regent.”

Rhodan felt as if Thora were stepping on the shards of his dreams. Was her accusation justified? No. He raised his head.

“Do you deny that you deliberately withheld information from me? Do you claim that you did not deliberately deceive me so that you could get your way and fly off to Arkon with Terran support? You wanted the mutants.”

Slowly, Thora lowered her gaze to the ripples on the surface of the water. Drops ran from her chin like tears, fell into the pond, and formed small purple circles.

“No. You are right. I deceived you, and so did Crest. We wanted to go home. We were afraid that you would stay on Earth and not support us if you understood the full extent of our background. Crest and I are members of the opposition, but we have friends. Charron da Gonozal would never abandon us. He...”

Rhodan looked through the simulation of water, blurry outlines showing him that the guards in the green uniforms had disappeared. “Later! This is our chance!”

He grabbed her by the hand, helping her out of the pond and dragging her back up, pulling a bit too roughly. Within him, anger raged. Thora and Crest had betrayed him. He had risked the lives of their entire crew based on his trust of them. The realization tasted bitter.

He understood that Thora wanted to go home. But the fact that she lied to him and used him hurt. For him, the two Arkonides had become friends.

I was fooled by her and Crest.

Two Mehandor boys in wide trousers and red shirts laughed at them as they stepped out of the hemisphere, dripping with water. Several adults turned around and made puzzled gestures with their hands. Thora ignored the glances and adjusted the wet headgear with a dignified gesture. Rhodan pulled her away, deeper into the crowd, in the direction of the next structural gap.

They got fifty yards farther before he saw Tschubai and Marshall crouching under a shrub with broad red fronds that were as tall as a streetlight. He immediately changed direction.

Thora did not object to him dragging her with him. Their eyes turned anxiously to the point in front of them, where an inconspicuous passage in the energy dome was occupied by at least twelve guards.

Through noise, laughter, and the acrid smell of smoke, they reached Tschubai and Marshall.

"It's over," Marshall said in lieu of a greeting. "The Mehandor know we're in this dome, and they're waiting. The guards are well informed, and at least twenty others are waiting for us undetected."

Tschubai pressed his lips together. A tear of excitement ran from the corner of Thora's eye.

Rhodan took a deep breath. "We'll surrender before things get worse."

Contrary to expectations, Thora did not protest. She looked away from him, her face gray. Rhodan suddenly knew that on that third of January 2037, it was not only his dreams that had been shattered, but also hers.

What did Thora and Crest actually have in mind? A coup on Arkon? The assumption took his breath away.

"Let's not delay it unnecessarily," Marshall advised. "We'll walk towards the passage and raise our hands. The Mehandor should understand the gesture."

Rhodan took a step forward. One of the guards became aware of him. He raised his arm and pointed at them. His mouth moved. They stood too far away to understand him as he said something inaudible to a comrade.

"The time has come," Tschubai whispered, his voice sounding as if he had shards of glass in his throat.

Rhodan straightened his shoulders and raised his hands. Then a singing voice sounded behind him.

"The uniformed men look quite nice, but wouldn't you rather come with me, Perry?"

They turned around. Behind them stood a one-and-a-half-meter-high creature that looked like a mixture of mouse, beaver, and human. His arms were resting on his hips, and he tilted his head with its large ears. A single tooth shimmered in his open mouth. Tschubai's eyes widened, and Marshall laughed softly.

"Gucky," Rhodan said. "How did you do that? The force fields have hermetically sealed off the Web."

Gucky flashed his fluorescent tooth. "Not for the savior of the persecuted of the universe!" He stretched out both arms. "Group hug!" he said with a grin that looked funny on his furry face. At the same time, there was an expression in his brown eyes that made it clear that their situation was not funny and his words were no joke.

Rhodan approached quickly. Meanwhile, three guards were making their way over.

"Thank you, Gucky!" Rhodan grabbed one of the mousebeaver's hands; Tschubai took the other. Thora and Marshall touched Gucky's forearms.

From one moment to the next, their surroundings disappeared. They crossed the seam, reappearing in the middle of the blood-red holo of an inner tunnel tube. Rhodan noticed with concern how exhausted Gucky looked. Like Tschubai, the Ilt had exhausted himself only a few hours prior.

He stumbled. Rhodan grabbed him by the shoulders and held him tight.

"We have to walk," said Gucky. He looked at Rhodan apologetically. "At least a little bit. Then Ras, John, and I can form a block and jump to the *Tosoma*. The ship's access is sealed off by a guard, but they are not yet trying to enter by force."

"Good." Rhodan grabbed Gucky by the hip and lifted him.

"What are you doing?" the Ilt protested. His voice sounded sharp. He pressed his hands hard against Rhodan's forearms. "I'm not a stuffed animal! Let me go or I'll bite!"

Rhodan hesitated and put him down. "Do you really want to walk?" He spared himself the trouble of telling Gucky that he didn't look like he would be able to do so. Gucky seemed to be on the verge of collapse, his legs trembled, and the otherwise elastic, upwardly bent beaver tail hung on the ground without energy, as if it had degenerated into a mop. The fact that he had used physical strength instead of telekinesis to push Rhodan away from him spoke for itself.

Gucky let out a sound that sounded like a mixture of a snort and a sigh. "Okay, be my cab and carry me piggyback. But don't tell Reg."

"That's a promise." Rhodan let Gucky get up. Marshall supported Tschubai.

They hurried off. They didn't see any guards, and just a few minutes later, they were close enough to jump.

The bridge of the *Tosoma* appeared out of nothingness, and Rhodan breathed a sigh of relief. They had done it.

19.

Hetcher

Tweel

Hetcher dozed and snuggled up in his protective pressure suit, which surrounded him like a second skin. Half asleep, he thought incoherently of the three volcanoes, which were lined up like pearls on a chain and represented the dominants of the Tharsis region with Olympus Mons.

What are their Earthly names? Ascraeus, Pavonis, and Arsia Mons? Are these good names? What do they mean?

He blinked and could see traces of lava outflows and tubes in the distance. They ran through the flank of the volcano like veins. The plain had also been marked by fan-shaped lava flows.

“Don’t fall asleep, Hetcher!” the voices scolded him. “Don’t you see that he’s catching up? Cyr will get you. He’s not allowed to do that.”

Hetcher blinked. Aescunnar was actually catching up, approaching him bit by bit. He tensed his muscles abruptly. Fear drove away his fatigue.

“What do you want me to do?”

“Kill him!” demanded a thousand voices.

Hetcher held his breath. It was as if the thick suit suddenly no longer protected him from the icy cold of Mars. “Kill him? No! Cyr has done a lot for me. And even if he hadn’t—I don’t kill! No one!” How could the voices demand that of him?

“Hetcher!” The voices became flattering. “There is no other way, you understand. He must not follow you any farther. Put an end to it.”

“No! He saved my life!” The elation that Hetcher had felt on his way dissolved like a cloud of ice in the sun. The volcanoes were not allowed to demand that from him. It wasn’t right. Doubts began to arise, and it was difficult to breathe. “Who are you to want to kill him? Is his life worth nothing to you?”

“Trust us, Hetcher. The sacrifice must be made. Do what you have to do.”

“No! All life is sacred! I don’t kill.”

“This is an exception.”

“There are no exceptions!”

The voices whirled angrily in Hetcher’s head, each with a different vibration. Ugly, polluted colors surrounded them. Then, suddenly, they went out.

Hetcher took a deep breath in and out. His diaphragm ached from tension, his fingers trembled. In his head, the thoughts raced as if they wanted to run away. Had he gone mad on the long drive? Did he imagine the voices that had so vehemently demanded that he kill Aescunnar?

“I’m not crazy,” he said. But for the first time, he seriously doubted it. Never before had the souls of the environment urged him to harm others.

He looked at the display next to the steering wheel. The distance between him and Aescunnar was steadily shrinking. He shook his head and spat into the helmet tube.

“Madness,” he said, feeling more sober. “Mars has driven me crazy.”

He looked out through the tinted glass. On the slightly rising plain stood a broad rock, now as silent as all the other boulders. It had sharp edges, had never been softened by water like the basalts on the planets in the Vega system.

It looks like a cube, Hetcher thought. *A cube with splintered edges...*

The cube had all his attention. He saw a reflection flit across the stone. In the meantime, it was getting dark. What he saw was not allowed to exist. A bright glow meandered across the surface, then the cube burst before his eyes.

“What?!” Hetcher gestured, stunned. He backed away, pressed his upper body into the seat. His saliva production increased abruptly, and he spat several times into the tube.

In front of him moved the cube, which was now no longer a cube! He had changed its form and was still changing. What had at first seemed like a burst was a metamorphosis in a matter of seconds. The rock jumped towards him, turning into a bird-like animal with a long neck and wide, four-toed lizard feet.

Hetcher could see one of those feet from below, right in front of his face. The tips of the toes had suction cups that stuck to the dome as if the creature were a reptile. Something soft slid across the glass, scanning the structure. It looked like a beak, but it bent from one side to the other, similar to a proboscis. Hetcher could not see the eyes from his position.

He didn’t know when he had ever been so amazed in his life. For a moment, he could only stare at the underside of the foot above his face. With difficulty, he managed to raise his arms.

“You...what...what are you?” he said.

His bewilderment mixed with awe. The rock had changed. There was life on Mars! Life that may have come from the deepest interior of the volcanoes and evolved over millions of years. Or was the creature on Mars alien like Hetcher? Did it perhaps come from a completely different system?

“I’m the one who called you.”

Hetcher heard the answer in his head. Pale golden light flared up around the creature. It was silent for a moment.

Hetcher’s heart was beating to the breaking point. He barely dared to breathe. There was a slight pressure on his brain, as if

invisible fingers were scanning it.

“Call me...Tweel,” said the creature. “That’s a good name.”

“Tweel!” gesticulated Hetcher.

He laughed silently and felt the twitch in his diaphragm. Tweel was a creature from a story Aescunnar had told him. A chemist had had to make his way back to his base via Mars and found and rescued a being named Tweel. The creature looked exactly as Hetcher imagined Tweel to be: not bird, not reptile, no trunk, no beak, and all together at the same time. Things with four fingers, which could be called hands, and feather-like appendages around the beak shaft completed the picture.

Suddenly, Hetcher suspected that the creature needed help and that was why it called itself Tweel—if the experience was not a hallucination, triggered by lack of water and sleep.

“You’re alive?” he asked. The gestures came hesitantly. He no longer trusted his perception.

Tweel’s voice rang out loud and clear. “Yes, we are alive. Still. But we need your help, Hetcher. You understand us. Kill this man! You have to do it!”

Hetcher closed his eyes, thought for a few seconds, then his hand touched the emergency button.

The Mars mobile braked sharply, and Tweel lost his grip on it. He was thrown away from Hetcher, hurled like a projectile. From the Ferron’s point of view, the creature disappeared between dust and twilight. Again, it seemed to change shape. It adapted to the environment before slamming into the sand. Had it turned into red dust in a flash?

With his mouth open, Hetcher stared at the spot where he had last seen Tweel. He felt perplexity and, at the same time, the certainty that he had to act.

He folded the awning via a switching element, opened the dome, and waited for Aescunnar.

20.

Cyr Aescunnar

Surprises

On Earth, the volcanoes would stretch across the U.S., Aescunnar thought.

Although his Mars mobile was getting ever closer to Hetcher, his thoughts kept going back to the three giants of the Tharsis. After leaving the Valles Marineris, he drove straight between Arsia and Pavonis Mons to the ascending plain. Due to the hundreds of kilometers-wide base of the volcanoes, he could not make them out as individual mountains with his naked eyes. It was only with the help of the display that he understood what the ascending flanks next to him meant.

Aescunnar had loved mountains for as long as he could remember. Whether the Alps or the Himalayas, he was fascinated by cliffs and peaks. And the question of what happened behind them. For him, the mountain was a symbol to not see obstacles as insurmountable difficulties and capitulate to them, but grow from them. Those who reached the summit were rewarded with a view. How far could you see from the summit of one of the Martian mountains?

He was abruptly torn from his thoughts when he saw Hetcher emergency braking on the integrated monitor. The beam and dash approached unexpectedly. The displayed distance shrank noticeably, causing Aescunnar to lift his eyes from the display. His attention turned to the Mars mobile in front of him, which he could now see well with his own eyes. Surprised, he slowed down. Hetcher had stopped!

For a moment, Aescunnar was too dumbfounded to comprehend what had happened. Why had Hetcher stopped? Had the Ferron finally come to his senses? No, he was too stubborn for that. His vehicle must have had an issue.

Excited, the historian breathed faster. If he confronted Hetcher, they could drive back together. They might make it to the next aid station just in time. There, they would be able to fill up their water tanks and the oxygen supplies for their suits and make their way back to Bradbury Base.

A feeling of elation made Aescunnar hum softly. He couldn't wait to finally reach Hetcher's vehicle. He stopped close to the Ferron's Beetle and formed his own dark tire track next to that of the stationary Mars mobile. When he looked over, he found that the dome was open, but Hetcher was nowhere to be seen.

"Hetcher?" he asked over the radio, forgetting in his excitement that Hetcher couldn't hear him. He scolded himself and activated the frequency that lit up blue light on Hetcher's display. "Hetcher? What's wrong?"

The unreal thought occurred to him that the Ferron could have been forced to exit the vehicle. He chuckled. *Oh man*, he rebuked himself. *I'm completely overexcited.* Tension and fear tugged at him. If he didn't find Hetcher fast enough, his chase would have been in vain.

The long time alone in the Mars mobile had taken its toll on Aescunnar. For the first time, he thought he could understand what astronauts must have gone through on stations like the MIR and the ISS, crammed into a confined space without a sky above them.

He opened the dome and got out. The twilight painted long, bizarre shadows and alienated the Mars mobile in front of him. Slowly, he circled Hetcher's vehicle. The tires looked undamaged, inflated, and in working order. The awning was folded in. If there had been a technical issue, it was not one that could be seen from the outside.

"Hetcher?" he asked into the silence. If Hetcher had seen the light on the display, his words would be readable in the Ferron's own language. "Where are you?"

An uneasy feeling crept over him. He spun in circles. Hetcher could not have disappeared in such a short time. He had to be

behind one of the many taller boulders. Was he on his way on foot through the stony desert? Had his friend gone mad, thinking he had to walk through this unreal landscape like Job or other prophets?

Aescunnar shook his head and clenched his jaw nervously. He searched the stones surrounding him. Most of them were too small for Hetcher to hide behind. A dozen larger ones remained.

The bad feeling grew. He was expecting something unexpected at any moment. Would the Ferron attack him?

“Hetcher, do you want to play hide-and-seek? We’re too old for that, aren’t we?”

No answer. The wind whistled softly across the plain; one of the moons came into view in the sky. The stars rose beyond the twilight, cold and distant.

Undecided, Aescunnar looked from left to right. He bent down and picked up a fist-sized stone. Without being able to explain it, he felt threatened. A faint rumble made him swivel around. Hetcher suddenly came out to his left from behind a large, sharp-edged rock that looked like a cube with broken edges. He gestured wildly with his hands.

“Go!” he said. “Go, go, go!”

Aescunnar had never seen the Ferron so dissolved. He let go of the stone. “What?” he snapped back.

But Hetcher seemed too excited to look at his hands. He stubbornly repeated one word, followed by other gestures. As he did so, he looked into Aescunnar’s eyes pleadingly. “You mustn’t be here! Get lost! Go while you still can!”

Aescunnar shook his helmeted head. “No!” He pointed to the Mars mobile. “Come back. We can talk better in there via the display and the computer.” He did not know all the gestures of the last sentence and replaced “display” with an implied box, which he formed with his thumb and index fingers. He also pointed to his wrist.

Hetcher stomped. It looked strange in the thin atmosphere. The dust swirled sedately upward as if in slow motion. Desperate, Hetcher repeated his gestures.

“I won’t go unless you come with me,” Aescunnar insisted. He could be at least as stubborn as the Ferron, he was sure of that. When it came to stubbornness, no one bested him.

But the bad feeling inside him grew stronger, making him sweat and look around uncertainly, as if they were being watched. He noticed that Hetcher was becoming more and more nervous and hectic. But why? The Ferron had now become upset to a level that was completely inappropriate...wasn’t it?

Aescunnar approached him. “What’s the matter, Hetcher? What are you afraid of?” He gestured hesitantly and was sure to have made numerous grammatical mistakes, but Hetcher still seemed to understand him.

The Ferron froze. The gesture for “fear” seemed to have triggered his sudden transformation. The blue skin under his tinted helmet disc looked pale. He spat into the wide helmet tube twice in quick succession, his eyes blinking nervously.

“I...” The Ferron didn’t get any further. The stone next to him was moving.

Aescunnar jumped back. “Oh my God!” he gasped. Adrenaline flooded him; his legs trembled. *What is that?* The sharp-edged rock turned into something that at first glance looked like an ostrich, but it wasn’t. “What...”

The thing jumped at him, and a sharp beak flew past his shoulder into the air. The creature’s body crashed heavily into him, throwing him backwards into the dust. Suddenly, Aescunnar was lying on the ground. Stones pierced his back. One had narrowly missed his spine.

He wanted to crawl away. His brain was overwhelmed and he was slow in reacting. Even thinking felt exhausting.

A living being! I have been attacked by something alive! That's impossible!

But the impossible sat on his chest, weighing at least sixty kilograms. Its sharp beak hacked at the protective suit. Aescunnar threw up his arms, closing his fingers into fists as the beak hacked into his hand. He straightened his head and neck a little and clasped the creature's neck. His fingers squeezed.

I'm dreaming, he thought. *I fell asleep in the Mars mobile and am having a nightmare. There is no life on Mars!*

A second voice inside him pulled him out of his daze: *If that thing tears your protective suit, you're done for!*

This was not a dream, but deadly reality. Aescunnar's muscles ached, so violently did the grotesque creature pull back his neck to be able to hack at him again.

"Hetcher!" he cried, looking at the Ferron.

Hetcher stood frozen less than three steps away from him and watched as Aescunnar fought for his life.

"Da izak maklon, izak watlon."

"If you break the contract, you break life."

Mehandor

21.

Tatiana Michalovna

The Derengar

"This way!" Michalovna pointed along dizzyingly high, beige housing units to a tunnel entrance. Above the blocks, a gray-blue sky was simulated, which belied the fact that the blocks were inside a restructured cylindrical ship. "Levtan took this path. I'm sure he was thinking of the tunnel between the extensions."

Crest took the lead. "If he wants to contact the fleet, he needs the hyperradio. Hurry up!" The Arkonide was moving so fast that Michalovna and Sloane could hardly keep up.

Michalovna's lungs burned after the sprint to the tunnel entrance, but it would never have occurred to her to complain. She wanted to help Crest. Without hesitation, she plunged through the brightly lit entrance alongside her companions.

"There!" Sloane pointed to a vehicle along the wall. "Can we take that?"

"Sure!" Crest jumped ahead, swinging himself into the driver's seat and quickly activating the sensor control panel.

Michalovna was not yet properly seated when the vehicle made a leap forward and shot into the wide aisle. They dodged two oncoming vehicles, and a green forest of three-dimensional ice crystals flew past them, quickly becoming a blur of colors.

The Faku is definitely going at least fifty kilometers per hour, Michalovna thought. It was hard to breathe, her lungs hurt constantly, and the pressure didn't make it any better. The wind bit into her skin.

"Positronic!" Crest commanded sharply. "Where's the nearest access to the hyper transmitter?"

A friendly woman's voice replied, "In Section D. But appearing in person is not mandatory for you as an Arkonide. For a corresponding surcharge..."

"Thank you, we prefer to appear in person."

"Then you would like to use this as your destination?"

"Yes!"

"Expected arrival in two minutes," the positronic informed them.

Michalovna clawed her fingers into the upholstery. Two minutes. That was an eternity. Perhaps it was already too late. Levtan would be able to deliver the radio message to the Empire at that exact second if he had also taken a Faku and had not walked. She stretched out her mental fingers towards him. Her paragift searched for thoughts nearby, but she found only blurry impressions from other Faku riders. Suddenly, her telepathy hit an invisible wall. She gasped. At the same time, the Faku slowed down.

Visibly surprised, Sloane furrowed her eyebrows. "Are we there yet?" They had been traveling for less than two minutes.

"No..." Crest's fingers flew over the control panel. "Positronic, why have we stopped?"

The softly modeled voice replied immediately, "You've been recognized, Crest da Intral. Your status has changed. You no longer possess 'Hastlu,' as you have become a part of the Seventh. Report immediately to the Guards of the Web for a new status."

"What does that mean? Part of the seventh?" asked Michalovna.

Crest's face contorted. "This means that we have become the payment for the repair of the *Tosoma*. Come!"

They had become payment? Confused, Michalovna shook her head.

The Faku had stopped. Crest jumped out and ran towards the tunnel exit. Several hundred meters of projected forest lay in front

of them, past screeching, ape-like animals that seemed so real that Michalovna was frightened. Just below eye level, every twenty meters, information ran across the image in Interkosmo, which destroyed the illusion. They explained that the animals were called Ma'pek, came from a colonial planet, and ate human flesh when they got it.

"We must…get…to the ship," Sloane gasped.

"First the traitor!" cried Crest, without turning to them. He seemed to be getting faster and faster. Nevertheless, they were too slow on foot to stop Levtan.

"It's too late!" Michalovna felt hopelessness take away her stamina. "Levtan is too far ahead. I can't find him anymore!"

They reached the end of the tunnel. Crest slowed down. He gathered his bearings. "Over there!" He pointed to a building cube that was painted in different colors, including a flashy orange.

Michalovna looked around uncomfortably. The cube was one of four that towered in front of them like a high-rise block. On the narrow streets there were numerous Mehandor in colorful clothes. Many of them looked at her curiously. "We're sitting ducks," she said.

Crest continued to charge forward. He rushed up a three-step staircase that led to an orange entrance. On the wall was a representative holo, which contained, among other things, the word "hypercom." Two doors slid to the side and led into the simple interior.

"Where is he?" Crest spun in circles in a vestibule with a golden-green plastic floor. Five sliding doors that were made to look like silver smoke led off from the vestibule .

Michalovna stood unsettled next to Sloane, while Crest opened one access after another by touching a sensor. Astonished, beardless faces looked at her. In the last cabin was an elderly woman who beat Crest with a green bag and shouted at him, "Private conversation, Arkonide!"

Crest retreated. “He’s not there…but…”

“Stop!” came a rumbling cry from the entrance.

They swirled around to see two Haklui forces in green-silver uniforms. Behind them, the sliding door closed.

The taller of the two Mehandor approached them. He had a round face with alert eyes. His shoulder width was unusually large, the sound of his voice demanding. “Crest da Intral, you and your companions are a part of the Seventh. You must follow us without resistance to Sector F, where you will receive instruction and information on your present situation.”

Crest became visibly calm. He did not despair as he had done shortly before. The fire in his eyes frightened Michalovna. “Good,” he said. “We’ll follow you.”

“But the *Tosoma*…” Sloane began.

“We’re part of the Seventh,” Crest explained. “Let’s go with them and not cause trouble for the two Mehandor.”

Michalovna felt that Crest had no intention of surrendering. She didn’t understand what he was up to. Irritated, she stepped up beside him. “Crest …”

She didn’t get any further. The attention of the two guards waned. They turned to the exit. Crest bent down and snatched a gun from the leg pocket of his shiny pants. Straightening up, he fired it once, then twice.

Sloane cried out. The two guards slumped motionless on the golden ground. As if dead, they lay on the plastic. Behind them, the woman with the purse, who had just stepped out of her cabin, screamed.

“Let’s go! Come on!” roared Crest.

Stunned, Michalovna followed him out while more shouting and loud talk broke out behind them. No one followed the group.

“Crest, what have you done?”

“Don’t worry. The guards are just stunned.”

Sloane remained silent.

“Just stunned?” Michalovna stopped. Anger flared up in her, displacing the dangerous situation in which they found themselves. “Have you gone mad? You smuggled a gun onto the Web! You shot two Mehandor! According to Thora’s instructions before leaving, that is exactly what we should *not* do under any circumstance, right? This means any contract is void and we’re fair game!”

“Do you want to stay on *Ke-Matlon* for seven years?” asked Crest.

Michalovna was silent, her anger plainly visible. There remained the dull feeling of having been betrayed. She would never have expected such an act from Crest, the thoughtful scientist. Her gaze fixed on the bulge on his chest beneath his light spacesuit.

Is it immortality that makes him act this way?

Crest’s willingness to take risks frightened her. Had he forgotten the responsibility he had for the crew of the *Tosoma*?

The Arkonide grabbed the folded helmet on his belt. “You may be angry later, Tatiana! Come, please!” He started moving again.

Michalovna reluctantly followed. “Where to?”

“We’re going back to the *Tosoma*.” There was a matter of course in Crest’s answer, as if his intentions were a walk in the park. But on the way, they would have to reckon with persecution from Mehandor who were now also ready to shoot at them.

Sloane caught up with them. “And how are we going to do that? In a few seconds, it will be teeming with guards! If you haven’t just learned how to teleport in the last ten seconds...”

Crest cut her off. “On the path that Levtan showed us. I saw a door out of the Web in the tunnel. We’ll get to the ship!” There was iron determination in his voice.

Michalovna felt her fingers go numb and the cold of the Russian winter came over her. *Is this still the man at whose side I went through the trials of* It*?*

She didn't utter the thought. Her confidence had been deeply shaken. Silently, she chased after Crest into the tube, towards an uncertain fate.

"Soi Gongusdor okonlun Arkondor."

"Only fools trust the Arkonides."

Mehandor

22.

Belinkhar

Breach of Contract

Belinkhar slowed her steps. She had already walked up and down the Gantus market three times. “Where are they, damn it?”

Etztak stood hunched over by a steel strut that belonged to a Unithian fabric store. “We lost them. They must have exploited a structural gap in the force fields.”

“Probably.” It annoyed Belinkhar that Etztak might be right. *Ke-Matlon* could not be completely sealed off without causing unrest. For Mehandor, openness was a core value.

An incoming radio message interrupted her thoughts. It was Jeston. Along with some of his people, he had positioned himself at the next structural gap at the transition to sector D.

“Do you have them?” Belinkhar asked directly without greeting him.

“No, but there is important news. The duty of peace was broken. Crest da Intral smuggled a weapon onto the Web and used it.”

“That old Derengar?” Puzzled, Belinkhar brushed a strand of hair from her forehead. Crest da Intral was the last person she expected to break the law.

“Yes, Matriarch. The image transmission is ongoing, but there is no doubt about it.”

“I see. That changes the situation. We could take the entire crew into captivity.”

“Could?” asked Etztak, as if he were an angry echo. He pushed himself off the strut. “What do you mean by ‘could?’“

Jeston also seemed irritated. He was awating further orders.

Belinkhar hesitated. With the breach of the duty of peace, she was entitled to deal with the strangers as she pleased, according to Mehandor law. Captivity was the milder choice; she could also order to have the Terrans killed and only arrest the Arkonides so that they could watch from a nice cell as the *Tosoma* was used as a death barge pushed into one of the nearby suns.

Actually, she should be happy. This was her day. All of her decisions had been right in some way. Because now the *Tosoma* and its crew lay in front of her like a gift, ready to be disposed of at her will. Her clan had made a great gain; even Etztak had to acknowledge that, and it was due to her.

She was sure of the recognition of the clan, but she had a bitter aftertaste. She hadn't hoped to win it that way. She pressed her lips together, knowing that Etztak and Jeston were waiting for her decision. She had to give them instructions, whether she liked it or not.

"Ask the Terrans to surrender immediately! The Web is not a shooting range! Arrest Crest da Intral and all those who have weapons with them! Etztak, you..."

Belinkhar fell silent. Etztak was gone, the space at her side empty. She looked around the market. Where was her shadow? He had to be by her side. She felt a giggle welling up inside her, which she quickly and resolutely forbade herself. Since taking office, she had wanted Etztak to disappear. Now the unbelievable had happened: her shadow had left without a word of farewell, contrary to protocol.

"Etztak?" She told Jeston to get back to work and tried to reach Etztak by radio. In vain. If Etztak noticed her attempts, he was ignoring them. For a moment, Belinkhar was tempted to believe in the multifaceted star beast, a fairy tale that her father had liked to tell her and Gyrikh before going to sleep. The multifaceted beast grabbed naughty children and dragged them away to a planet at the edge of the universe where there was no cream ice cream or cake.

Where did he go? She tried again, but the result was the same: Etztak remained missing in action.

23.

Hetcher

The Decision

Hetcher's heart was racing. He felt trapped, overwhelmed, and confused. In front of him, Aescunnar had fallen to the ground, landing on his back due to Tweel's attack, and was fending off the hybrid creature with both arms. Tweel's beak hacked at him like a knife, the misshapen body pushing him relentlessly down to the ground, and Aescunnar was calling out Hetcher's name.

Hetcher wanted to run to Aescunnar and help him, but he couldn't. The impulses from his brain seemed unable to reach his legs. While Tweel and Aescunnar engaged in fierce combat, Aescunnar managed to push Tweel away a bit and get to his knees. A battle raged inside Hetcher that forbade him to move.

Cyr doesn't stand a chance against Tweel. The thought popped up suddenly, and it felt like a realization. Aescunnar was fighting back with all his might, pushing Tweel away as he got to his feet. Although it looked good for him, Hetcher instinctively knew that man could not prevail in the long run. Tweel was able to change his form. He did not wear a pressure suit, the tiniest hole in which would condemn him to an agonizing death by suffocation. Tweel didn't seem to be affected by the cold of Mars, nor did he seem to have a problem with carbon dioxide.

Should Hetcher forbid Tweel to do anything to Aescunnar and perhaps forfeit his own life? Hetcher wanted to help him; Aescunnar was his friend, or at least the closest thing he had to one at Bradbury Base. The human had saved his life and put himself in this danger because of him. Part of Hetcher could not bear to see this struggle and stand still.

But there was also the other part that stuck with Tweel. Both were equally strong, two halves of a whole, one as important and valuable as the other. If Hetcher helped Aescunnar, he would be

betraying Tweel. And Tweel was ultimately the fulfillment of an age-old wish, if not the answer to all his prayers and hopes. Tweel was alive! He was rock, dust, and sentient being all in one. In itself, Tweel seemed impossible, yet he existed, and he had turned to Hetcher for help. Tweel was like Hetcher: he could hear and see in a way other Ferrons and humans couldn't. He saw the colors, felt the vibrations of the names and things. Hetcher had to follow him, do whatever Tweel asked him to do, because Tweel was a miracle.

Surprisingly clever, Aescunnar dodged another attack and let Tweel run into the void. The two stocky legs with reptilian feet scratched over the sand and splashed away small stones. For a long time, all three of them had been standing in a growing cloud of dust that glittered over them in the last light of the sun.

Tweel jumped off the ground with his scrawny legs with unimagined force. He catapulted himself into the air to pounce on Aescunnar beak-first. The man dodged the creature, grabbed a stone from the ground, and threw it at Tweel. For a moment, Tweel was stuck upside down in the red sand and had to get loose first. Bit by bit, his large beak slid out of the ground while his legs tried to find support.

Aescunnar dared to launch a desperate attack. He pounced on Tweel and threw the creature to the ground, but Tweel had freed his beak and escaped from his grip like a slippery snake. Hetcher wasn't sure if the creature had stretched its spherical body or if the dust was obscuring his vision. With a lurching buck, Tweel escaped, putting distance between them, and straightened up a few paces away from Aescunnar, who was still staggering. He would attack again. Until he had achieved its goal and Aescunnar was dead.

Hetcher heard Tweel's voice in his thoughts. "He must die, Hetcher. Understand that!"

Hetcher did not succeed in thinking or gesturing an answer. Could he let Aescunnar die? He groaned silently. He wanted to turn away, but he forced himself to keep his eyes fixed on them. It seemed cowardly to him to close his eyes.

Tweel attacked. With a single leap, he threw himself against

Aescunnar's legs and tore them from under his body. It looked strange, the way Aescunnar fell slowly, how lower gravity brought him to the ground, as if he were attached to invisible ropes pulling him down. Tweel jumped on top of him and pushed him firmly to the earth. This time, Aescunnar was on his side. He raised both arms and punched Tweel.

Hetcher barely dared to breathe. Aescunnar's movements had slowed down visibly. His strength was waning. Tweel thrust forward with his beak, chopped, bit into the suit, and tore at it. The Ferron material slipped out of his beak. It bulged but was still intact. Tweel tossed his head from side to side like a hunting dog shaking its prey to death.

Hetcher felt nauseous and he pressed his hands against his stomach. His perspective shrank under Tweel's attack. The beak, the tearing at the suit, which he could not hear but could interpret very well...it would be over in a moment, then there would be a gaping hole in the Terran's protective suit, letting death in. He had to make a choice. Right away. Or Tweel would take the decision away from him for good.

Hetcher freed himself from his paralysis. He stumbled towards Tweel and grabbed him by one of the black, wing-like lugs that ended up in hands. His fingers clasped supple muscles, or at least something that felt like massive flesh under leathery skin. He pulled Tweel back.

Leave him! he thought intensely. *Let him go!*

Tweel paused and turned his long neck towards Hetcher. He had three eyes like the Thort. Hetcher held his breath. The Thort was an extraordinary Ferron who, through his third eye, possessed astonishing abilities, with the help of which he led the Ferrons. Wasn't this resemblance to the Thort proof of how divine Tweel was? All three organs of vision were slits and shimmered yellowish.

It has to be, Hetcher. Don't stop us. The man must die. Let go of me.

Hetcher hesitated. For a seemingly endless moment, they looked at each other. In Tweel's yellow slits, Hetcher thought he could see

anger and relentless harshness. He took a deep breath, let go of Tweel, and stepped back. He had made up his mind.

“Most of the cultures of your homeland see me as one God.”

It

24.

Levtan

On the Brink

“Izkat, wake up!”

Levtan touched Izkat’s face, stroking her neck. She mumbled something in her sleep and rolled over. He looked around the housing unit, which was modeled after a Saku cave. The bed resembled a nest of brackish mulch wood. On the walls, the dazzling, oval ring bodies of the Saku crawled busily on top of each other. Levtan had never understood what Izkat loved about those animals. She had tried to explain it to him (“They can carry fifty times their own weight, fly, and even survive two years without food!”), but he hadn’t really understood it.

“Izkat! I’m in a hurry!”

She opened her eyes and recoiled slightly. Glue residue from the mask could be seen on her face. They formed shreds of rolling like ray-burned skin.

“Lev...were you able to get something from the strangers?”

“Not yet, but I have a surprise. I need to get to a communications point. Do you want to come with me?”

The fact that he had to visit a certain building and could not use the hypercom from the comfort of his home was due to the damn arrogance of the white hairs. The Arkonides had the monopoly rights on hypercom, paid dearly for by the Mehandor, and demanded personal on-site checks, which were recorded. Supposedly, it was about safety, but Levtan knew what it really was: technical harassment! In this way, the Arkonides subtly showed who they thought was in charge in this part of the room.

Levtan had first wanted to go directly to the communications

point in the next section. There was only one hypercom on the station, accessible from several places, and it could take time to get his turn. But Izkat's housing unit had been on his way to the second closest communications point, and he hadn't been able to suppress the nagging worry about whether or not she had escaped the Haklui forces.

Izkat grinned sourly. "And that's why you've come to me? Were you afraid I was going to turn you in?"

She wasn't completely wrong about that, he had actually been afraid that she might spill the beans to the Haklui forces if she got caught and ran out of Kan'or. Levtan returned her grin, anguished. "Maybe a little. So, how about it?"

She jumped up, pulled a dress over her head, not caring about underwear, and got into her Sar shoes. "Okay, I'll come with you. What are you going to do?"

"A surprise is only one if you don't reveal it beforehand," Levtan instructed her. He wasn't sure why he was keeping it a secret from Izkat. Maybe it was because there was an unkillable voice inside him that whispered not to do it. When he told her what was going on, the decision would finally be out of his hands.

Maybe I'm afraid she'll knock me unconscious so she can reap the reward on her own, he thought, half seriously, half amused. Izkat was petite even for a Mehandor, and the idea of her knocking him down without a weapon was comical to him.

"Know-it-all. You've always had only half a positronic." She followed him out of the housing unit, brushed her face, and peeled off the last pieces of glue from her skin. "Do you still have fabric? My supplies are empty."

The question irritated Levtan. Not because she had asked it. Kata asked him about Kan'or at least twice a day. Although she earned more chronnor than he did, she spent the units faster than the speed of light. What bothered him was that he actually did have Kan'or with him, and it was untouched in the side pocket of his lightweight spacesuit!

How can I have Kan'or with me without taking it? Less than an hour ago, withdrawal cramps had catapulted him almost irrevocably into space. He should have immediately given himself a dose in his housing unit. Instead, he had secretly pocketed three ovals while the Terran women were immersed in the sight of the waterfall, and then set off.

"Do you have any?" Izkat interrupted his thoughts.

"Yes, yes..." They entered the Warin tube and Levtan purposefully headed towards a Faku.

"I'll pay you or replace it, honestly." Izkat's voice became whining. "Just one pad; we're buddies, aren't we?"

Levtan bent down, pulled a pad out of his pocket, careful to make sure that no cameras could pick up what he was holding, and pressed it into Izkat's fingers.

"You're the best," she praised him effusively, as she never did when they slept together. But he understood. As hollow and enigmatic as her talk sounded, he knew exactly what she felt at that moment. The amazing thing was that he didn't even feel anything like it.

I should be suffering from withdrawal symptoms like a wounded Ma'pek.

He started the Faku, and Izkat swung up next to him onto the passenger seat, hiding her hands inconspicuously under the protruding console and gluing the pad on. Then she slumped back into her seat, a stupid smile on her face.

Levtan accelerated. His thoughts raced ahead of the vehicle. There was a desire in him to take Kan'or. He even thought he felt a fine scratching in his stomach and a slightly numb feeling in his kidneys. But that was the difference: he *thought* it. His perceptions did not come out of his body as messengers; they were the work of his psyche. They had as little to do with real withdrawal symptoms as a colorful wall holo had to do with a real planet.

Levtan felt a slight tingling sensation in his finger—again, he thought of the unique, completely irrational moment when he had touched the breast pocket of Crest da Intral.

It's as if the device has healed me. My mind wants Kan'or, but my body doesn't need it any longer.

He took a turn, shot past several advertising holos, and overtook a light blue vehicle belonging to the Haklui forces.

Images raced through his head like a private screening held just for him. He saw himself with Izkat at *Dasganlu*, a chic restaurant that, with just a few touches of the sensor, turned into a seemingly run-down pub like those found on some of the Arkonide colonial worlds.

As if in a recording, he heard himself speak. The camera above his head showed him everything from above: "We have a right to Kan'or, Izkat. These steelheads can't forbid us to take our drug. It's a free Web, not the Regent's backyard."

The scenery changed, showing him in a Kan'or frenzy, one of the many times he had overextended himself and struggled with the overdose. He held on to a Swoon pillar, next to the "Mastinklu," the official message of the Swoon on the Web. He vomited, spewed bright chunks over a carefully cultivated shrimp flower splendor, and believed he would die of shame and pain.

More pictures came and they all had one frightening thing in common: they left Levtan speechless, as if he had woken up after a horrific night and was lying there with the blanket over his head while the impressions of a nightmare he had suffered chased through him.

The right to our drug, he thought. The sentence seemed bitter to him as bile. What had he done but waste the best time of his life? The drug was like a monster from the fairy tales of mothers and fathers. It had ambushed him in a dark corner of the tunnel and chained itself to him ever since. It would never release him from its pull, binding him eternally to itself like a crazy mother who did not want to let her child out into space and preferred to lock him up

rather than let him lose.

I am a slave to the Kan'or. The urgency of this new thought made him sick.

"Stop, damn it!" yelled Izkat beside him. "We're already here."

He slowed down and came to a stop about one Faku's length in front of the next vehicle. Stunned, he got out and helped Izkat dismount. In front of them was one of the webbed pieces that contained a communication point. From this point, it was possible to get access to the hypercom on the station.

They took an elevator to the tenth floor and passed through security. At the reception desk sat a petite guard who had barely left the time of maturity behind him. With his smug grin, he had certainly scored more points on the family holo than Levtan had done at the time. He waved nonchalantly to them and referred to a free two-person cabin with a terminal. Actually, the gesture was superfluous, because the wide light bar above the sliding access clearly indicated that it was unoccupied.

Levtan went ahead and activated the terminal. Izkat closed the door behind him by touching the sensor and sat down at one of the two armchairs. Hastily, Levtan pulled out his chip cube and latched it in. A soft beep sounded that lasted only a moment.

What am I doing?

He had no middleman; he would fake a private radio message to reach the Arkonides getting past Belinkhar. Izkat had taught him how to do it. Just as the Mehandor drew their information from the highest circles of the Regent, the Arkonides also had informers and ways to obtain clan information through people like him. A year ago, Levtan had managed to sell an instruction from Belinkhar to the commander of a nearby sector of the Empire, who was of low rank but had given him ten days' worth of Kan'or.

The answer to his question was clear: he would do what he had always done, what he had done for the last few years, as reliably as the light of the suns that fell on *Ke-Matlon*. The essential question

was another: did he really want that? He didn't need Kan'or anymore.

"Access to the communications transmitter is currently not available," a sonorous voice informed him. It was a voice meant to suggest trust by covering up its artificiality.

Levtan hesitated, then multiplied the sum. They were his last units. Even without Kan'or, there would be enough things he had always wanted to afford and couldn't. A new era was dawning, without deprivation and false modesty. Without Kan'or.

Although the thought tempted him, he heard in his memory the voice of the colonist with the pretty face: "Please, don't do it."

"You're next in line," said the positronic. "As soon as the transmitter is available again."

Izkat put her head back on his neck. "What kind of crap is this? You've paid so much that even if Belinkhar herself was using it, she'd be bumped!"

"Maybe she is." Levtan regretted having paid the many chronnors. Whoever gave the most came first; only the matriarch had the supreme prerogative.

They waited.

"Take advantage of the break," Izkat advised, patting herself on the thigh. "You haven't had a dose for a long time, have you?"

Levtan sat down next to her and, in his old habit, reached into his pocket. There they were, the sweet ovals of life. The pad lay there lightly with the smooth side on the palm of the hand, as if it weighed nothing. No weight, no responsibility.

Undecided, he held up the oval adhesive film. It hovered over his joint, the fine hairs seemed to long for the flesh, about to pierce the top layer of skin.

"Go ahead!" hissed Izkat. As if hypnotized, she stared at Levtan. Her mouth was open, her arm muscles tight.

She can't stand to watch, Levtan realized. He had once seen a Swoon in Dasganlu who had knocked a glass of Savia out of another Swoon's hand in anger because she didn't want to drink it empty. No addict could comprehend when their drug was disregarded.

Bit by bit, he lowered the pad. Izkat's pupils jumped open; she leaned forward, as if she could feel with him the intoxicating effect when he finished his work.

Levtan paused, not a finger's breadth away from the veins that covered his forearm like winding, mysterious paths. He saw in front of him the Arkonide, Mahinran da Uktir, whom he had stolen from at that time. A rank insignia made of Trillium crystal, he let go of it. The value would have been enough for three weeks of Kan'or, but the price had been much higher. What would you have to pay to fix the wounded pride of an Arkonide? If it had been up to da Uktir, he would have catapulted Levtan out into space without a suit. In the process, the old general had regained his badge.

"It's dirty!" Uktir had shouted again and again. "Soiled by this Ma'pek!"

The Arkonide had insisted that Levtan become a "Zantlu," an outcast from the clan, who had violated the law. That would have meant banishment, but matriarch Gyrikh hadn't gone into that. In her eyes, the punishment had been harsh enough, and Levtan remembered well the pitying look she had given him. She had known that this was his descent. No one would want anything to do with him anymore. The only one who had always stood by him was Izkat.

With his eyes closed, Levtan felt inside himself. He knew he didn't need Kan'or anymore. His body was free. If he got it right this time, he would walk through the tunnel of victors instead of scratching the wall from the outside. Maybe not through the real tunnel over by the racetrack, but it would feel like it was every step of the way. It would feel good. It would feel right.

Levtan opened his eyes and looked at Izkat, who was the picture of greed. "You can have it."

She stared at him as if he had gone insane. “What?”

“Honestly, Izkat, you can have it. I screwed you. There is no hyper radio message. That’s the surprise. You’ll get my Kan’or before you board. Everything, all the supplies. Five hundred grams. That should be enough for your time on the *Estator*, don’t you think?”

Her eyes stepped forward, her fingers clawed into the backrest. “Are you playing a stupid game with me, Lev?”

“No. I don’t play anymore.” His conscience spoke up and told him that he could not give her the Kan’or because it would harm her. He ignored the instructive whining. He knew only too well how futile it would have been to ask Izkat to stop with him. He could just as easily ask Mahinran da Uktir to become his boot-cleaning slave for life. No. Izkat would get her supplies. If at some point she wanted to quit on her own, he would support her. This was no different.

He gave her the adhesive oval in his hand and also took the last one out of the suit pocket. “Do you believe me now?”

She nodded violently, as if an invisible giant were shaking her. “I... I don’t understand, Levtan.”

“I don’t understand it myself,” he admitted, his fingertips together. “But I’m done with Kan’or. Forever.”

She looked at him for a long time and seemed to sense that he was serious. Fear reddened her face. “Are you done with me, Lev?”

He took her in his arms, his mouth close to her ear. “I’ll stay with you, Izkat. And go with you to the *Estator*. Out into space. This is long overdue.”

She cried. He wasn’t sure if she was sad, joyful, or relieved.

The sonorous voice cut through her soft sobs like a knife. “You can send the desired radio message. The connection is in place.”

“It’s fine,” said Levtan. “I don’t need a connection anymore.”

The positronics were not programmed for emotional queries. “Ten percent of the units have already been debited. If you terminate the connection, you will lose the money.”

“Never mind. I’ve won enough.” Levtan stood up and dragged Izkat with him. “Come on, Kata, we’re going home.”

She leaned against him. For the first time in a long time, it felt good to live on the Web and to be at home with the Nham clan.

“Imasen waka haldor, asa imasen li Ke-Pondan.”

“You can see a thousand stars and you still won’t know anything about tomorrow.”

Mehandor

25.

Rhodan

By Order of the Regent

“Get the ship ready for take-off; check the engines.” Rhodan stepped up to his console and sat down.

Thora followed him and stopped beside him. She pointed to a hologram of the Web that hovered in the air next to them, as small as a child’s toy. “Crest is still in there!”

“We’ll get him later, Thora. There are nearly two thousand people on board, for whom I am responsible.”

“You think only of yourself!” Her eyes watered.

Rhodan raised his head. He refrained from saying that it was she who was constantly thinking of herself. Meanwhile, he was convinced that Thora and Crest were sought by the Regent with high priority.

“You know that’s not true. Anne Sloane and Tatiana Michalovna are over there with Crest, and I wish by all the suns and planets that they had made it back. Just like Crest. Just like everyone else. Besides, I’m thinking of you, Thora. If we stay, your mission will have failed. But if we continue, we will have the chance to return here later. And then not as beggars.”

Visibly tense, Thora put a hand on his arm. “I’m sorry.”

“Water under the bridge. Will you help me?”

Without another word, Thora went to her console. “Prepare the engines! Fastest possible start!”

“Perry!” Bull’s complexion threatened to approach the color of his hair. “Belinkhar is on the radio. You should listen to this. Can I patch it over?”

When Rhodan nodded curtly, he turned around and activated the nearby holo. Just as when they had first arrived, a life-size image of Belinkhar appeared in the center of the bridge.

Rhodan stood up and stepped into the detection field. He saw that Thora was unobtrusively giving him a sign. She would continue to take care of the launch of the *Tosoma* in the background.

"Matriarch, what can I do for you?"

Belinkhar's green eyes narrowed. Her anger was visible. "Save yourself the false courtesy, Rhodan. You intend to commit fraud and avoid the Seventh."

Rhodan straightened his shoulders. "You're right. I will not pay the Seventh on your terms. As I tried to explain in the trial, Terrans are not Mehandor or Arkonides. We are not subject to our families or our government in such a way that we can be freely disposed of as objects. I would be violating the rights and laws of Terra if I were to stipulate that one seventh of my crew must remain on the Web. My offer to come to an agreement with you still stands. We're going to pay, but not in this way."

Belinkhar lowered her gaze. She seemed unhappy. "I regret this escalation. I would have been content with the Seventh. That's no longer possible."

A feeling of dark foreboding slowed Rhodan's heartbeat. Although Belinkhar seemed contrite, her admission was not a surrender. Instinctively, Rhodan knew that the matriarch would not let them go.

"What are you getting at? Will you let us start and accept that we will pay at a later date?"

"The situation has changed, Rhodan. A crew member of the *Tosoma* opened fire on the station."

Rhodan held his breath. "Who?"

"Crest da Intral. The Derengar."

Thora turned around from her console. “What? That’s a lie!”

Belinkhar shook her head regretfully. “I’ll send the recording.”

Her holo disappeared. Reduced to fifty percent of its previous size, a scene was played in front of them that seemed unreal to Rhodan. Crest shot at a guard with an expressionless face. He did it from behind, when the guards had turned around. He didn’t seem to have any scruples about it. The weapon he used was identical to those found on the *Tosoma*. There is no doubt that he had smuggled it off board, contrary to Thora’s explicit instructions.

Silence spread across the bridge. No one would have expected mild-mannered Crest to commit a violent act. Thora’s eyes glistened moistly.

“That’s impossible. You’ve manipulated these recordings! Crest must have been threatened in advance! He would never shoot for no reason!”

The holo disappeared, Belinkhar reappeared on the bridge. “Whether threatened or not, you see, the situation has changed completely. It may be that I was not receptive enough to your law. According to my law, the law of the Mehandor, all your rights are forfeit with this act. Not only do I have to hold you, I am even obliged to do so. In any case, you will have to pay the Seventh and there will also be a procedure in which it will be decided whether the rest of your crew will have to stay on the Web, as well as how to proceed with the *Tosoma*.”

Thora turned away again. She signaled to Rhodan that they were ready to launch in a few seconds.

“What are you asking for?” asked Rhodan.

“Isn’t that obvious? Capitulation. On *Ke-Matlon* there are various small groups of Terrans. I’ll unlock the channel of communication so you can order them to surrender.” Belinkhar was silent for a moment. “If you’re thinking of fleeing, I would strongly advise against it. Surely you noticed that we do not have weapons systems at the station. Our ships are our home, and we don’t want to

involve them in acts of war. You may think you can escape into space if you pull yourself out of the docking brackets, but that's not the case."

Rhodan's pulse quickened. "Explain," he demanded, even though he knew he was revealing his intention.

Belinkhar seemed confident; her facial expressions and gestures showed a woman who neither bluffed nor lied. "The Mehandor may be peaceful, but we are not stupid, Rhodan, even if the Arkonides may say so in their folk wisdom. We have repaired your ship. You can start safely. But you won't get far. There are two radio frequencies that I can trigger. The first is designed to fix a powerful tractor beam within a kilometer. With the necessary energy, I could pull the *Tosoma* back to the station through space, like a child throwing a boomerang. The second frequency is a backup in case we don't react fast enough or your drives are unexpectedly strong. At a range of up to several thousand kilometers, it triggers smaller explosions in the engines we installed. Do you understand that?"

Rhodan saw all the color disappear from Bull's face. After having been so red, it seemed almost disturbing to watch his skin grown white. Thora had turned around and interrupted the countdown. Marshall's mouth formed a hard line. Horrified looks turned towards Belinkhar like pinpricks.

Rhodan stared at the matriarch in deliberation. He believed her. She had distrusted them from the beginning.

Belinkhar raised her arms in a gesture of defense or apology; Rhodan wasn't sure how to interpret it.

"If we had received the Seventh as agreed, you would never have known about the fuses, Rhodan. Once you were out of reach, we would have had no way of influencing the *Tosoma*. We've repaired your ship, and we're good at what we do. My people would regret the destruction of the engines, but if you don't cooperate, the *Tosoma* will once again become the wreck you brought into my orbit."

"I see. I believe you. We will refrain from any plans to escape.

Connect me to the station public address system. Will I be heard everywhere on the Web?"

"In all public places."

"Well, I..."

Bull interrupted him. "Perry, won't you at least try to escape?" he asked. "Maybe Belinkhar is bluffing."

Rhodan found it difficult to put his deep conviction into words. He shook his head. "I know what I'm doing, Reg. If the *Tosoma* becomes a wreck, we'll have lost for good. If we cooperate, it may be possible to reach an agreement. We leave part of the crew here temporarily, but only to exchange it for volunteers later. It's impossible without a ship."

His friend lowered his head like a bull that was about to attack a red cloth. But he did not. His gaze remained lowered to the floor of the bridge. Thora, too, looked away. Both were tacitly giving Rhodan their consent to let him decide.

"Belinkhar, is there a connection?"

The matriarch confirmed with the already familiar turning of hands. Rhodan was about to start speaking when a bright sound whistled through the bridge. A violent tremor caused the *Tosoma* to tremble. The ship vibrated, as if too high a tone would shake it like glass. For a moment, Rhodan feared that the steel might break like an amorphous crystal.

"What's that?" asked Bull. He jumped up from his seat.

"Structural shocks," reported positronics.

"By the Emperor's scepter!" exclaimed Belinkhar.

The matriarch's holo was reduced to a side field. The space around the Web lit up. Eleven spaceships appeared out of nowhere. Their formation formed an arrow pointing in the direction of the *Tosoma*. The arrival made the entire Web vibrate in the way a sudden wind vibrates the web of a spider.

Rhodan read the data that appeared. The unit had a battleship of about eight hundred meters, two five-hundred-meter cruisers, and six heavy cruisers, each two hundred meters in diameter. It was accompanied by unarmed supply freighters.

"A squadron from the imperial fleet!" Thora exclaimed. Her eyes gleamed moistly. Excitedly, she got up. "That's it!" She stood stunned between her and Rhodan's seats, as if she couldn't comprehend what was happening.

"They're sending a transmission," Bull said. His voice sounded hollow.

"Accept it." That was all Rhodan could come up with. He knew that the decrepit *Tosoma* wouldn't stand a chance against the squadron. Nine of the eleven ships were heavily armed. The thermal emitters could transform their spherical spacecraft into a cloud of atomic debris within moments.

The holo changed and a black-skinned creature of a height of a good three meters appeared in the center like a tree trunk. His furrowed face with the three dominant eyes looked so lifelike that Rhodan flinched.

The thing of nightmares, he thought, and then scolded himself internally. Although the bald, leathery face with the three eyes and the oval mouth did not seem very inviting—the mouth in particular seemed to be able to swallow any hope—the black-and-silver uniform was impressively well made. The fabric shone in a way no Terran fabric ever could. Several symbols were emblazoned on the right side of the creature's barrel-shaped chest. Rhodan suspected that it came from a world with high gravity.

"A Naat!" cried Thora. She clenched her fingers into fists. It looked to Rhodan as though she wanted to pounce on the projection.

"What—" Rhodan began.

The Naat interrupted him. His voice boomed through the bridge. The Arkonide was accent-free. "Novaal speaks, commander of

Keat'ark and Reekha of the 247th Forward Border Patrol. Surrender, Commander da Intral...or should I call you Thora da Zoltral? You were identified on the basis of holographs. You and your ship are hereby placed under my command. Submit to my instructions. This is our first and only demand. You and Crest da Zoltral have to answer to the Regent for high treason. Negotiations will not be accepted."

"High treason?" asked Bull.

Thora's eyes watered and she seemed frozen in place. Silently, Rhodan looked at her. It was over. The proud Arkonide had given up.

"Never laugh at a Naat who backs down.

He could be preparing to leap."

Arkonide

26.

Belinkhar

The Betrayal

Outwardly, Belinkhar was the picture of calm itself. Only behind her back, her intertwined fingers nervously kneaded into each other, revealing what it really looked like inside her.

“What do you want, Naat?” She stretched her chin up and looked at the three-meter-tall holo, annoyed that she had accepted it in real size. She should have reduced the naat to half its size.

“My name is Novaal, I’m the Reekha...”

“I know who you are. What do you want?”

Noval’s amber eyes narrowed and a vein twitched above his third eye. He raised one arm. “Be careful, Matriarch. Your arrogance is not justified. You granted ‘Hastlu’ to the *Tosoma* and its crew, repaired their ship, even though you suspected that you were harboring traitors who had unlawfully come into possession of the *Tosoma*.”

Noval’s voice grew quieter and quieter, and it was precisely this that caused Belinkhar to feel an unpleasant tingling sensation running down her spine. Her heart was beating faster. Her body advised her to flee. She gritted her teeth and remained silent.

The Naat turned both hands, visibly satisfied. “Nice. I see we understand each other. Surrender the Arkonide traitors and their primitive accomplices and the imperial ship without delay. Otherwise, I will resort to the use of force.”

Despite the threat posed by Novaal, Belinkhar spread her arms and tilted her head slightly in a gesture of wonder. “Traitor? Ship of the Empire at my station? I don’t know what you mean, Novaal.”

“Oh no?” Novaal didn’t move a millimeter; only his oval mouth

opened and closed. He looked like an idol made of stone. “The *Tosoma* is unmistakable. I have already contacted her. In addition, your shadow, Etztak, has provided me with a comprehensive report. With his help, it was possible to identify the traitors—a task that would have been yours, Matriarch.” He leaned forward.

Belinkhar pulled herself together so as not to back down. She pressed her boots against the ground.

Noval’s mouth took on a round shape, an expression of mockery. “Perhaps Etztak is better suited than you to lead the Web. You don’t seem to care much about the well-being of your clan. Shall I fire a warning shot at the dome of the garden so that you can see how serious I am?”

“No.” Belinkhar’s mouth felt parched, as if she hadn’t drunk in days. A warning shot would shake the platform and could lead to chaos, depending on the intensity. One of the biggest fears of the clan was an unexpected attack from space. Mass panic would be the result.

Anger welled up inside her. *This is all Etztak’s fault! He betrayed me!* That’s why her shadow was gone. He had used the station’s transmitter to contact the Arkondies. Wretched Zantlu!

“Then cooperate!” thundered Novaal.

As if stunned, she looked up at him. This henchman of the Empire was not to be trifled with. He embodied a determination that most Arkonides no longer possessed.

Belinkhar stepped wordlessly to the main console. Anger at Etztak clouded her thinking, pushing her far from logic. She had to make a decision. The fate of her clan once again depended on her, and she would do the right thing.

27.

Cyr Aescunnar

Arsia Mons

He had that dream again. The whole of Mars transformed its interior into the foaming broth of a gigantic, shaken champagne bottle and erupted, salty, sulfurous, destructive.

Aescunnar groaned. He felt weak and tired; every muscle ached. Infinitely slowly, he remembered his fight against the alien. Or had that also been a dream? It must have been a dream. He believed more in a lava eruption millions of years later than in a mythical creature that had tried to kill him.

Blinking, he opened his eyes. His oxygen supply was slowly running out. The suit indicator advised him to change its portable tank in the near future. He turned his head and saw Hetcher sitting next to him. Relief flooded through him and gave him a moment of bliss. He had actually only imagined this being from Mars, which reminded him of Tweel from Weinbaum's story. His oxygen must have run out. Something had happened, but Hetcher hadn't left him out there; he had saved him.

Gratefully, he wanted to turn to Hetcher, but he couldn't move. Dazed, he looked down at himself. Thick plastic ropes kept him in his place. They came from the bowels of the Mars mobile and were meant to secure transport. For a moment, Aescunnar didn't understand what that meant. It was as if his brain was looking for a word that was on the tip of his tongue, but he couldn't pronounce it. Then the truth slammed over him like a wave of ice and made him breathe sharply: he was tied up! Hetcher was holding him captive. He jerked at the rope that bound his arms to his body and his body to the seat.

"What's the matter? What's this all about?" Aescunnar repeated the question until he saw the computer reacting and translating his words on the display into Ferron characters. "What are you doing?" he asked. Anger and disappointment seethed inside him. Hetcher was not his savior, but his guard.

"It was the only option," Hetcher said. "Otherwise, you would have died."

“What does that mean, ‘the only option’?”

“It is what it is.” Hetcher didn’t sign anything else, and a blanket of silence fell over them.

Aescunnar was glad he didn’t see the strange creature anywhere. The longer it stayed away, the more certain he became that he had succumbed to a hallucination. He focused on the display and the environment. Above them stood dark clouds of ice like the fingers of a divine hand. The headlights illuminated a slope. Aescunnar compared what he saw with the data on the display. They were heading up the Arsia Mons, and soon the sun would rise.

Arsia Mons. It was difficult for him to think, as if his brain were wrapped in molasses. He tried to find out how many kilometers they had already climbed. Arsia Mons had an altitude of fourteen kilometers, and if he was guessing correctly, they had already climbed five or seven of them.

Aescunnar involuntarily tried to imagine the massive impact event that had probably been the cause of volcanic activity in the past. As with Earth, it was very likely that a second asteroid had collided with Mars, changing its shape and turning it into a pear, while the Moon had formed near Earth.

On the display, the entire shield volcano was shown from above, revealing the caldera, which was over a hundred kilometers long, leading down into the depths of the planet. The cosmic cauldron dwarfed all volcanic craters on Earth. In contrast to the other volcanoes of the Tharsis plain, a towering spiral cloud hung over this caldera, formed from the sand of the last dust storm. It was unimaginable what quantities of magma must have once flowed in the thin atmosphere. How many millions of years had the great volcanoes smoked? Only sand remained. Crushed into the finest dust, the lava danced its red dance of death in solitude.

Finally, Aescunnar broke the silence. “Where are we going?”

“There.” Hetcher pointed through the transparent dome to the opening of a huge cave in the rock face, which measured at least a hundred and fifty meters. It looked as if a chimney had once stood

at this point, the side wall of which had broken away over a length of several hundred meters. At the same time, the structure seemed so straight that it did not fit into the unreal rocky landscape. Was it a cave created by living beings or had it been formed naturally? Was this the secret that drove Hetcher to act so strangely?

Aescunnar's anger dissipated. He again became the child who loved discovering miracles. Was there life on Mars? He knew these cave entrances from camera images. They were called the Seven Sisters. It was rejected early on that there could be an eco-niche with primitive life in the cave systems under the great volcano. The extreme high-altitude climate destroyed any such possibility. Or not? Excited, Aescunnar looked at Hetcher.

"What kind of cave is that?"

"I don't know."

"But why—"

Hetcher interrupted him. "He knows."

A mixture of trunk and beak came across Aescunnar's shoulder. It whipped past him, slowed down, and flinched. The beak slid over Aescunnar's helmet, sliding over the visor still scratched from the fight, as if to caress the skin underneath.

Aescunnar broke out in a sweat. His hopes were shattered like thin ice. Tweel really existed, and he was at his mercy.

The creature jumped over the two men and squeezed between them, pushing them all the way to the edge of the vehicle. Above them, the cold light of the stars glittered.

I wasn't dreaming, he thought, on the verge of fainting. *Tweel exists.*

He stared wide-eyed at the creature, while Hetcher steered the vehicle forward, into the wide cave entrance. Aescunnar felt an anxiety that took his breath away. He frantically looked at his oxygen levels to make sure the tank was continuing to supply him. Then he looked back at Tweel, whose three yellow eyes seemed to

shine from within. The creature stared at the opening.

Aescunnar's anxiety reached unprecedented proportions. He pressed his fingers convulsively around the plastic of the seat.

It's over. The volcano will swallow me and never give me back. Arsia Mons will become my grave.

"And if they haven't died,

Then they will die today."

Terran

28.

Tatiana Michalovna

Lost

"Come!" said Crest to the Terrans. "We have to hurry!"

Michalovna gasped. Despite the lower gravity, she was at the end of her strength; fatigue plagued her. She looked enviously at Crest. *With a cell activator, I might not realize how damn tired I am after all the mind reading and running away.*

Next to her, Sloane moaned cautiously. "We're almost there, aren't we?" In space, the view was deceiving, they all knew that. There seemed to be no end to the tunnel they crawled along, although the ship felt within reach. It was as if the *Tosoma* were mocking her.

"Maybe another kilometer." Michalovna continued to shimmy along the railing, always careful not to slip. They had taken the path that Levtan had shown them at the beginning and had continued to climb from there. Almost the entire Web was surrounded on the periphery by narrow corridors with railings. Presumably, they were used for maintenance. So far, they had only encountered two other Mehandor, whom they had ignored. In their suits with closed helmets, they hardly differed from the Web dwellers. The Mehandor were only slightly more delicate than they were. Crest stood out most in the suit, but he was also able to pass as a member of the clan.

Silently, they continued to work their way forward. Inside the suit, Michalovna was sweating. She couldn't get it out of her head that Crest, the prudent man she trusted, had smuggled a gun onto the Web.

Crest stopped. "Tatiana, can you find out if the *Tosoma* is guarded?"

They were perhaps still two hundred meters away, hanging on the outside of the Web like insects on oversized fruit. To get to the *Tosoma*, they had to re-enter the interior of the station. Michalovna closed her eyes and reached out with her mind. She sensed Sloane's fear.

Further, she spurred herself on. Her mental gift expanded, searching the area and finding thoughts.

"Several Mehandor," she said. "They're armed, guarding the ship, and stopping people. Two are standing near the entrance, but they don't seem to expect the outside path to be used."

"We'll never get back," Sloane whispered.

Crest gave her a smile. "I'm going alone. I'm going to stun the guards, work my way up, and hope that I can attract the attention of Gucky or Ras. Then all three of us can be picked up."

Michalovna hesitated. "We would stand out too much as a group." She didn't like the idea of letting Crest go, but what choice was there?

Sloane leaned against the tunnel wall, short of breath. "Okay, Crest, go ahead. You'll be faster without us. We'll wait behind the entrance."

"If there's any trouble, I'll come back," he assured them.

The phrase elicited a weary smile from Michalovna. If there were difficulties, Crest would be captured and so would she. Certainly, based on his light spacesuit and sudden appearance, the Mehandor would realize that they were moving on the outside of the tunnel.

Crest walked, exhilarated, like a competitive athlete. None of their strenuous activities seemed evident from the way he moved.

"Shall we take a short break?" asked Sloane. "I'd love to have a smoke." She giggled, and Michalovna heard the tension in her voice. "Wouldn't that be the true freedom that the advertising of cigarettes promises? Smoking in the orbit of another planet..."

Michalovna relented. “Just a minute or two.”

Sloane leaned back against the wall and slid to the floor with her knees bent. “What a bummer! If only we had never left the *Tosoma*.”

“Yes.” The telepath was not in the mood to talk. She stared at the ship, which seemed to be just a jump away at the end of the tunnel. Shortly after, her muscles loosened up a little, and she stood got up again. “Come on. The two minutes are up.”

Sloane fought her way to her feet. She didn’t protest. They drew ever closer to the end of the tunnel.

Then, a shock caused the Web to tremble. Sloane cried out, her feet lost their grip, and her fingers came loose from the railing. Michalovna grabbed her hand. “Anne!”

Together, they managed to get her hand back onto the metal bar.

“What was that?”

Michalovna looked at the *Tosoma*. Above the ship, in the blackness of space, a fleet of ships had materialized. They floated in formation like an arrow pointed at the old Arkonide ship, as if they wanted to fly from an invisible string and wipe out the *Tosoma*.

“Oh no!” She ran forward faster, barely holding on to the railing. “Arkonides! Certainly not a friendly visit! Look at the ships!” Although there was no rational reason for it, Michalovna felt that this fleet had come not to support the *Tosoma*, but to destroy it.

Sloane ran after her. She stumbled several times, cursed, and scolded herself. Michalovna bumped her shin on one of the side bars. She would definitely have a bruise there. But she didn’t pay attention to it.

Maybe I’m wrong and the Arkonides are coming to help us, she thought with a hint of hope. *Thora may have summoned them.*

No, surely she could bury that hope. These ships had not come to the rescue. Menacingly, they hung in space, ready to pounce on the

helpless *Tosoma*. She kept going.

Crest rushed to meet them. “We have to go to the ship! Right away! If we don’t get on board, we’ll be left behind on *Ke-Matlon*!” He grabbed Michalovna by the hand. The touch made her uncomfortable.

“Do you want to shoot the path clear?” she asked. The question sounded cold and biting, although Michalovna felt nothing but hot fear that threatened to turn into panic.

“No, the Mehandor are leaving! That’s why I ran back to get you. We can try it together! Come!”

Crest led them first to a metal door that led inside, then through a narrow side tube out onto a platform surrounded by a force field. The suit showed good oxygen reserves on the display on her wrist.

Michalovna felt like she was in a crazy dream. “Why are the Mehandor retreating?” Surely the matriarch knew that not all its crew members were on board. According to preliminary information, there were cameras in many places on the Web. The matriarch had to assume that scattered Terrans might try to reach the ship. It was illogical that she would not keep her prize guarded.

“The clamps are coming off!” cried Sloane.

“No!” Crest ran out of the shadow and cover of the tunnel wall, towards the *Tosoma*. The mighty ship moved away from him. It moved a few meters from its landing site, repelled from the platform.

Sloane stopped in front of her so abruptly that Michalovna bumped into her. The American turned around and grabbed her shoulders. Her eyes were widened like those of an anxious child who had seen a tornado in the field behind her parents’ house. “What does that mean?” There was panic in her voice.

Michalovna understood with eerie calmness that all was lost. But she couldn’t bring herself to give Sloane that answer.

The *Tosoma* suddenly picked up speed, but without its impulse

engines flaring up. The Web was repelling the ship with tractor beams.

Michalovna's stomach turned into a hard lump.

It's like throwing prey at a pack of predators...

Escape into Darkness

By Christian Humberg

“I cast my eye to the stranded vessel, when, the breach and froth of the sea being so big, I could hardly see it, it lay so far off; and considered, Lord! how was it possible I could get on shore?”

Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*

Prologue

The Hunter's Night

Kerh-Onf was burning.

Every few blocks, new flames blazed up from the streets at the city's heart, casting flickering shadows on the buildings' facades. The air smelled of smoke and the ashes of the ephemeral.

The hunter stood on the balcony and let his gaze sweep across the fire, bridges, swamp parks, shadows, and the rest of the odd scenery. He listened to the goings-on in the streets below.

They were bonfires, he knew. Right now, countless Topsidans had gathered around the mighty fires to celebrate the reason they had come together: the Festival of the Three Moons. The moons' light reflected off the roofs of the sprawling metropolis on the Groogwain plain's southern edge as Topsidans moved through the streets in droves, waited at food and market stalls, and watched the artistic performances on almost every corner.

Everyone seemed to be astir tonight, all the millions and millions of inhabitants of the Despotate of Topsid's capital city. They were celebrating life, which (according to popular belief) the moons symbolized when they hung above Topsid in this rare constellation, "The Heavenly Nest." On no other night were so many offspring conceived, so many couples formed. Everyone, from stall operator to street performer to preacher, burned with the inner flame of ardor on this special night.

But the hunter was not in the mood to celebrate.

You'll never really feel at home here, will you? said a voice inside him. It existed only in his imagination, but nevertheless sounded like a sad sigh.

The hunter lifted his gaze from the colorful hubbub far below and looked reproachfully at the bulky armband on his right wrist.

Then he paused.

I thought so.

The whole evening, he'd had the feeling that something was about to happen. He couldn't give any reason for it, couldn't support it with facts—but he'd learned to trust his gut. In his line of work, that paid off. And now...

With an inquisitive and slightly cautious air, he looked down at the roofs and alleys again. The celebratory atmosphere had changed. Not for those celebrating, not yet, but for him, their silent observer. Something was happening out there. Now, at this very moment. Something that—

A loud bang pulled him out of his reverie and confirmed his apprehensions. Had it come from Khir-Teyal? The hunter turned his head to look left, toward the ghetto. Yes, black smoke was rising from some of the buildings there.

That's no bonfire.

Nor did it remain an isolated incident. A second blast followed, somewhere close to the government district this time. Then a third, and a fourth. The explosions shook the metropolis in quick succession. The hunter heard alarm sirens blaring, saw the revelers turning their heads, baffled. *Is this part of the festival?* their questioning expressions seemed to say. The fearful flickering he detected in their eyes said, *I'm afraid it might not be.* The festival of life threatened to turn into a triumph of death.

Turmoil arose. Panic. The hunter watched as small groups started to run down the streets. Heedless, driven by fear, they barreled through the revelers, pushing and shoving. Some screamed. With each blast, it grew greater.

The hunter watched, motionless. In contrast to them, he was saving his strength. He sensed that he would soon need it.

And once again, his instincts did not betray him. No sooner had the latest explosion among Kerh-Onf's moonlit towers faded away,

replaced by a kind of horrified silence, than his communicator buzzed at him from his desk. He looked down at the city one last time, nodded, and stepped back into the apartment.

Inside the tower, it was warmer than out on the balcony. The walls were still providing heat, giving off the solar warmth they had stored up during the day. He liked that. It was more or less the only thing about this dwelling he inhabited, which was as worthless to him as the fake name on the door, that he got more than functional use out of.

A resplendent tapestry adorned the living room's right-hand wall. With artistic craftsmanship, it depicted historical events from Topsid's early years. The hunter ignored it as always. With quick steps, he walked past it to the stone table on the other side of the room. There lay his black, palm-sized communicator, which was still buzzing.

He picked it up and took the call without bothering to glance at the display. There was only one person who would contact him this way. "I'm listening, Megh-Takarr."

From the small window in the oblong device's center, an image appeared of a striking face. It was covered in cuts and scrapes, with more than one thin trickle of blood seeping out of them. Yet Megh-Takarr didn't look like he was in danger—at least, not anymore.

"I have a new assignment for you, Gihl-Khuan," he snarled angrily, not bothering with a greeting. "One that can't wait, you understand?"

The hunter gave a nod, then lowered his eyes for a moment. "I understand. Is it related to the explosions?"

"What?" For a moment, the ruler of all Topsidans looked confused. "No, no. Though, in a way, yes."

Gihl-Khuan pulled the stool over, lifted his lizard tail out of the way, and sat down. His mind switched to recording mode, ready for the details his employer was about to impart. "About the Arkonide, then." A statement, not a question.

Megh-Takarr's small yellow eyes glinted. "She took him from me," he hissed. "That... That dirty traitor of a whore made off with *my* prize! Find her, Gihl-Khuan. Whatever the cost and whatever victims it may claim—find them both and bring back my property!"

"I will," said Gihl-Khuan. It was no frivolous promise, but one made with the deepest conviction. Certainty. Unlike the emotionally shaken despot, the hunter had himself under control and knew what he was doing. "Tell me more, my lord. You speak of a traitor?"

"Khatleen-Tarr." Her name could not have been spoken with more disdain. "She's from Bismall-Kehn's cesspool of sin, the Purple Nest, but her career path was a little different from the other whores."

With few words, the despot explained what had happened over the past hours at the pleasure house in Khir-Teyal. He told of the promise the eccentric nestmaster had given him, then broken. However, he kept coming back to the woman, Khatleen-Tarr.

"I looked into her background afterwards, Gihl-Khuan. The relevant data is on its way to you right now. Don't underestimate her. She's more than she appears."

"Meaning what?"

Gihl-Khuan wasn't in the habit of demanding more clarity from his employer, but Megh-Takarr was riding a wave of anger that threatened to engulf all reason and all the essential details. Fortunately, the despot didn't even notice the small reprimand.

"That she's a deserter!" he thundered. "She abandoned the fleet shortly after the Vega invasion. She just slipped away, went underground. It's all in the files."

A lone wolf... For the briefest instant, the hunter felt something resembling understanding for his prey. Topsid may have been nominally his home, but he didn't really feel at home on this world and hadn't for a long time. Not enough to want to fight for it and risk his life. He was loyal only to the despot—he didn't care about the planet.

“You say I should track down both of the runaways,” he said, summarizing the assignment, “but only bring one of them, the Arkonide, to you. What shall I do with the deserter, my lord?”

Megh-Takarr snorted. “For all I care, you can rip out her scales one by one, then let her freeze to death out on the plain. Do whatever you like, but bring me the man, do you hear me? Bring him to me *alive!*”

Gihl-Khuan nodded again. “He won’t leave Topsid. And he won’t slip away from me.”

The ruler looked like he was about to say something else, but something happened to his left, outside the viewport, distracting him. Gihl-Khuan saw the corners of the image’s mouth contort, then Megh-Takarr cut the connection. He’d never been one for words of parting either.

There was no need anyway. The hunter knew what his task was. Everything had been said.

A cool north wind blew in from outside, making the earth-toned curtains swing in their loops. The wail of sirens hung in the air, and the promise of vastness, of the seemingly endless nothingness on the plain beyond the city. It reminded the hunter so strongly of the nights on Buntayn that it almost hurt.

Gihl-Khuan breathed in deeply and put the communicator back down on the desk. Then he stood up and stepped over to the wall hanging. His eyes ran across the historical scenes, searching, until he finally found the depiction of the Battle for Bor-Tha. He reached out and held his hand so close to the decorative weaving that hardly any air passed between his scales and Bor-Tha’s thread.

Immediately, the whole tapestry began to flicker. The hidden Positronic recognized Gihl-Khuan’s handprint, granting him the access he sought—and a moment later, both tapestry and wall were history. Where they had appeared to be, Gihl-Khuan’s gaze now fell on a few square paces of further room space. On the *real* wall, now five paces away, hung his weapon arsenal, just as he’d left it.

Gihl-Khuan took a dagger and held it aloft. A shaft of moonlight fell through the open balcony door and reflected off the silvery blade, making it sparkle.

“Khatleen-Tarr,” the hunter whispered into the silence of the room—and all of a sudden, he was home.

1.

The Spy Who Went Out into the Cold

Terrania

January 9, 2037

The Stardust Tower loomed over the Gobi Desert, soaring into the blue, early-morning sky like a promise given anew in a foreign language every day—one perceived not with your ears and your intellect, but with your gut. Your motions. By now, this symbol of a united mankind measured two thousand meters, and it was still growing.

Lhundup was standing across the street from the tower's entrance, where the buildings and streets had started to look like they were about to unite with the foot of the imposing giant in their immediate vicinity. Fascinated as always, he craned his neck, squinted as hard as he could to protect his eyes from the sun's still-weak rays, and looked upward in wonder. He immediately grew dizzy. There were mountains in Changtang far taller than the Stardust Tower, but whenever he stood directly in front of this marvel, he could hardly believe it.

"I've heard there are people," resounded a voice behind him with gentle laughter mixed in, "who can't stand up straight even though they're fit as a fiddle and stone-cold sober. Out with it—are you ill, or have you been drinking?"

Lhundup lowered his eyes in embarrassment and put his arms, which he'd flung outwards to keep his balance, back down by his sides. Only then did he turn around.

"Neither, Jun. I just...have a little vertigo, that's all."

"Funny thing to say when you're still *in front of* the tower rather than in it," Bai Jun remarked, coming closer. His grin took the reproach out of his words. The jute bag he wore over his shoulder

boasted a happily smiling sun.

Lhundup liked the mayor of Terrania, even if he always erred a little too close to pomposity and sometimes got a bit carried away. Shortly after the former general had stormed the city and broken away from China, and after the death of his former adjutant He Jian-Dong, Lhundup had joined up with him. Or, more accurately, forced himself on him. Lhundup, a simple infantryman, had followed his instincts, sticking by Bai Jun's side so persistently that the man had threatened to shoot him—only to make Lhundup his personal assistant after this threat still didn't deter him. That was why Lhundup was now standing in the morning chill, looking at his boss, half-expectant and half-skeptical.

"You asked me here," said Lhundup when Bai Jun didn't immediately pick up the mantle.

The mayor stayed silent a moment longer. Then he asked, "How are your injuries?"

Lhundup raised a hand to his forehead, where the doctors had had to staple his wound. Two days had passed since then. "Getting better. And how are you?"

Since the events surrounding the mysterious Cui, they'd hardly seen each other and had found no time for a long conversation with just the two of them. Lhundup couldn't claim to fully understand how events had unfolded, but he knew that the danger had been warded off and normality restored. On the other hand, there was really no such thing as normality in Perry Rhodan's desert city.

"How do you expect?" Bai Jun asked back curtly.

Lhundup sensed that Jun wasn't expecting an answer to this cliché, and was rather squirming out of giving one himself. He decided not to dig deeper.

The mid-height man's gaze wandered to the Stardust Tower. "I did ask you here; that's right. I want you to take care of another task for me. A very special one."

Bit by bit, Terrania's streets came to life. The first sounds echoed along the streets and alleys—conversation fragments, engines, footsteps on sidewalks. The scent of fresh coffee wafted over from an open window nearby. Young though the city was, it was also quite large, and its population density was not to be understated. Lhundup had never seen anything bigger that had been made by human hands. True, the streams of new arrivals from the early days had waned a bit, but endless numbers of dreamers, idealists, and uprooted folk from all over the world were still coming to Terrania's borders. They sought a new beginning in this stateless ideal free of limited nation-focused worldviews and political cronyism, and a new home—or to have a home at last.

Lhundup liked this time around sunrise when the day was still young and unburdened, full of possibilities. He often made his way through the empty streets at this time, awed by the city and its promise. The only downside was how damn *early* that time of day was.

"I'm listening," he said, trying in vain to suppress a yawn.

Bai Jun seemed not to notice it, or was merciful enough to ignore it. "What do you know about this tower, Lhundup?"

He furrowed his brow. Since leaving his home in Tibet and dedicating himself to Rhodan's dream like all the others, he had only rarely been confronted with questions that seemed this senseless. So he decided not to take this one that way either—for now.

"Roughly as much as most people here," he replied. "The Stardust Tower is named after the spacecraft that Rhodan, Bull, Manoli, and Flipper used to fly to the Moon. It keeps growing and growing, and although it's still being worked on day after day, inhabitants of Terrania have already moved into a lot of its floors."

At ground level, city representatives helped residents with their administrative and organizational questions. The stories directly above that housed a clinic run by Dr. Haggard and the currently absent Dr. Manoli. Then came apartments—among others, that of Homer G. Adams, the administrator and thus Jun's direct superior

in a sense—and more offices. But Jun knew all that well enough. What would be the point of regurgitating all that information?

"It holds secrets, Lhundup," the mayor said softly, looking at him. "Ones that not even the city's mayor is allowed to learn. Call me paranoid, but if I learned one thing in my long years in the military, it's to tell when others are trying to take me for a fool. And as much as it pains me to say it, that's what Administrator Adams is doing."

Lhundup ran a hand through his short, black hair. So that was what it was all about. Bai Jun was still annoyed about the secrecy Adams had shown on the matter of energy supply. Only, annoyed was presumably the wrong word.

A few days earlier, the fusion reactor Guanghui One had gone into operation outside the city. But in spite of prior assurances, Adams had diverted a large portion of the energy generated there to the Stardust Tower and away from Terrania as a whole. Lhundup knew that Jun had confronted the old man. But he also knew that the mayor hadn't managed to achieve anything with that confrontation. Adams's decision stood, and the administrator still owed Bai Jun an explanation.

And am I supposed to spy on Adams now? Lhundup already saw himself peering around corners like a secret agent or observing the city's leaders with a fake beard and wig on. A ridiculous image.

In his childhood, the nomads of Changtang had made it through some of the long, icy winter nights with communal film screenings. They'd densely packed themselves into one of their large tents, where someone would play a pirated copy of something on a battery-powered display. They were old flicks, sometimes *really* old, but Lhundup and his fellow tribespeople had enjoyed every single one. Not despite how different the stories and characters portrayed in them were from reality on the Tibetan plateau, but *because* of that. In particular, the British secret agent James Bond had appealed to Lhundup as a child. And now he was supposed to become Bond himself? He doubted he had the necessary acting skills, let alone the chutzpah.

“So you haven’t been able to learn anything new at all, then?” he asked, unhappy and incredulous.

“Are you kidding?” Bai Jun replied with a hint of military severity in his tone. “My feelers are all the way out, my contacts activated. Just last night, I sat with security coordinator Allan Mercant, but...”

Lhundup froze. He still had the disquieting feeling of having to slip into a James Bond role. “But?” he repeated cautiously, regretting it straight away.

“You like the dream of Terrania, don’t you?” Bai Jun asked with a faint smile. “You’re glad to be a part of it, building a shared future as a Terran along with the rest of us.”

“Oh... Uh, yeah?” Lhundup hated it when his understanding couldn’t quite keep up with the pace of events but was alert enough to let him feel it. At those moments, he felt like his own mind was trying to lead him by the arm— successfully in this case!

Bai Jun reached inside the jute bag and pulled out a carefully folded item. It was brown and, as Lhundup suddenly grasped with no small measure of dismay, definitely the right size.

“Congratulations, Lhundup. Your application to be a construction assistant on the Stardust Tower has just been accepted.” The mayor got his pod out of his pocket and read the time on the display. “You can start in...forty minutes. Mack and the others are waiting for you at reception.

Application? *At least there’s no fake beard and wig,* Lhundup thought, sighing. Then he looked up again...and gulped. “But Jun, I... I have a fear of heights.”

“And I have an urgent wish to take a three-week beach vacation.” Bai Jun slapped him on the back so enthusiastically that Lhundup had to take a step forward to avoid falling over. “But happiness comes to those who know how to ignore their own little problems when they have to. I bet that Uncle Dalaimoc whose sayings you’re always quoting would agree with me.”

Lhundup couldn't help but agree with Jun. Even if it felt—at least a little, and not to his intellect, but in his gut—like he was signing his own death warrant.

"Luhkneppel?"

"Here."

"Kaesbrod?"

"Here."

The pen flew across the clipboard, ticking off names. The American-born engineer who led the crew and was calling out the names was of average stature. His short hair, parted in the center, had its first gray patches starting to appear, and the corners of lips always bore the hint of a smile. His overalls boasted a patch at chest height bearing the name "David A. Mack."

And he was looking at Lhundup with quite some annoyance.

The young Tibetan blinked, startled, only now realizing that he must have missed his own name.

"You *must* be Lhundup, kid," said Mack. "Everyone else on my list is already checked off."

Lhundup felt the amused stares from the rest of the group. "What? Oh, right. Yeah, I... Apologies, but...I'm Lhundup."

"Not a name you have to apologize for," Mack said with a smirk. "And for next time: a simple 'here' is plenty." He passed the clipboard and pen to the man standing beside him, a Scandinavian with dark circles under his sleepy eyes. Then he clapped his hands. "All right, then, ladies and gentlemen. I wish you a very good morning and a warm welcome to Building Crew Delta. You're here because you're up for some hard but rewarding work and the thought of being hundreds or even thousands of meters up in the air doesn't immediately bring your breakfast back up, right?"

The fifteen people assembled in front of the Stardust Tower's

main entrance nodded; they were men and women of different skin colors and age brackets, all wearing the same kind of overalls. Lhundup thought of 007 and nodded too.

All those present understood Mack, since he was speaking Terran, the city's developing language. TerraNet could translate the citizens' various native languages almost perfectly simultaneously by now, but more and more of Terrania's inhabitants were making use of their own. That was one more thing that contributed to their sense of identity, Lhundup knew.

"Great." Mack nodded to his companion. "Rogen, tell the other fledglings what we have in store for them."

The Scandinavian stepped forward. His blond hair, tied into a ponytail, shone in the sunlight. "You're going to help build this magnificent building behind me. In doing so, you'll be making a direct, meaningful contribution to Terrania's self-image. But before you start..." He paused and grinned so broadly that Lhundup's face changed completely again. "We have a little surprise for you. Follow me."

"You heard the man, people. Everyone into the tower, lickety-split!"

The commanding tone was clearly meant jokingly, and seemed to really bring Mack joy. Under different circumstances, Lhundup would have appreciated the man's sense of humor too. Now, however, the young Tibetan was following the two engineers and other newcomers into the Stardust Tower with a queasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. As he'd feared, they walked right past the city employees' consultation rooms, which already had long lines forming in front of them.

Instead, they went straight to the anti-grav shaft. This tube, measuring a good twenty meters across, formed the core of the whole tower. As Lhundup knew, it stretched far up into the building. An "anti-grav field," as it was known—one of the many wonders that Arkonide technology had brought to Terrania—which allowed inhabitants and employees to reach individual floors quickly and safely.

“All aboard, and no smoking in the shaft, please!” Mack quipped as the last member of the group entered the field. Kaesbrod and Luhkneppel laughed merrily.

Lhundup, who preferred the stairs for very good reason, shut his eyes as his body lost contact with the ground and he floated into the air in that familiar yet unpleasant manner. He was pretty sure that even Her Majesty’s agent would never have had to endure *this*.

The journey ended at the sixtieth floor. The field didn’t reach any higher—so far?

Lhundup breathed out. *If they want to take us up any farther, they’ll have to switch to the elevators used only by building crews. I like those much better than floating freely like this.*

Mack promptly confirmed Lhundup’s assessment. “All change!”

When the Tibetan opened his eyes, the group was trotting along behind the two engineers to the elevators. Some of these took them outside the building, where a complex construction of tracks and scaffolding for the workers’ use was anchored to the tower itself. Lhundup practically turned rigid with horror when he saw it. He had to force himself to follow the others.

The trip was cramped and anxious. The cabins, rectangular cages made of yellow-painted metal and silvery sheet metal, jerked stoically upwards. The air grew noticeably thinner the higher they traveled, and smelled of lubricating oil. Lhundup was standing in the middle of his excitedly smiling companions who had crammed themselves into the elevator, and felt close to death. He tried frantically to keep his fearful gaze focused on the others’ faces—for fear that he’d otherwise look out into the horrifyingly endless depths instead.

After what felt like an eternity, the last of a whole series of elevators they had to use, some in the building and some *on* it, came to a halt. Metal squeaked and clacked as fixtures snapped into place. Lhundup tried not to think about how stable they were...or weren’t. Then Rogen pushed a button on the flat, pitch-black control console and the door opened with a loud rattle.

“We’re here,” Mack informed them redundantly. “This is as high as it goes.” Smiling, he opened a wide locker at the back of the cage and took some padded work jackets out of it, which he handed out to the group.

“Get dressed, people!” Rogen advised, slipping into a jacket himself and pulling gloves out of its pockets. “And stay close together when we get out. Up here, the tower’s nowhere near ready to move into, as you can see. And we don’t want any of you making any unplanned trips into midair.”

He gave Mack a brief nod and headed out. Lhundup and the others followed his example. The way led them into a bare gray corridor made of fiber concrete. Only now did Lhundup notice that the cold he felt didn’t come from his fear alone, but mainly from the fact that this floor appeared to have barely any outer walls or windows yet. Instead of closed doors to rooms and apartments, he was looking at a shell of a building. Unplastered columns rose up to a ceiling with uncovered electrical cables protruding from it and building instructions scribbled on it by hand here and there. Door frames silently awaited their missing doors, window openings the glass that would make them complete.

Lhundup’s heart pounded into his throat. Rogen led the group into a large, empty room whose outer wall was a milky plastic sheet that bent in the wind. He released one of its corners out of its frame, shoved it aside, and stood with his back to the precipice he had just created. He smiled. Behind him was nothing but the sky and the horizon.

“Listen up, newbies.” Mack smiled cheerily too. He almost had to shout over the wind that whistled rather loudly at the edge, drowning out almost everything else. “About ten meters above us is the current top of this impressive structure. Hardly anyone has been up higher than us so far, because the majority of the work here is done by autonomous machines.”

“And why are we here?” asked an Asian woman uncertainly.

Mack’s smile mutated into a smirk. “It’s time for your Stardust initiation.”

In front of the group members, some amused and some looking a little fearful, he moved another piece of the sheeting aside and stepped towards a construction that made Lhundup want to flee back into the airy cage again at the very sight of it. About a pace and a half behind Mack, the floor ended in nothingness. A single steel beam jutted horizontally out of the floor and reached maybe twenty meters into Terrania's cool morning air. At its end was a small, square platform with enough space on it for maybe three people three people side by side—and only if they put their arms around each other. Which they should do anyway, Lhundup thought, since if you were standing unprotected out in nothingness, with not even a handrail around you, you were best off using any handhold you could find.

There's no way we're supposed to go over that, is there? he thought, dumbfounded. *Please don't say we have to balance on that.*

"One by one, you're each going to talk a little walk," Mack explained, and Lhundup could have punched him for it. "One at a time. If you make it to the platform and back, you've passed the initiation, and you're one of the renowned Stardust Tower builders, now and forever." Beaming, he looked at the fifteen faces, all varying degrees of shocked. "Ladies, gentlemen? Who's going first?"

"I'm up for it," the man next to Lhundup said loudly. His red hair and the gleam in his eyes painted him, at least in Lhundup's estimation, as an adventurer. Terrania was full of people of his ilk.

"Mr. Luhkneppel." Mack nodded approvingly. "Why am I not surprised?"

Several of those present snickered. Lhundup was surprised but didn't say anything. A mix of fascination and dread had seized him and robbed him of his ability to speak. Beyond nervous, he watched as Mack helped Luhkneppel into a harness made of belts, robes, hooks, and eyelets with a few routine hand motions. It looked like the kind mountaineers might wear. Only now did he notice the second, markedly narrower steel beam that jutted out of the tower about two and a half meters above. This one had a contraption on it that two of the safety ropes connected to.

“Nothing can happen, as you can see,” Rogen murmured. The Scandinavian had walked over to Lhundup and put a hand on his shoulder—a gesture no doubt meant to be reassuring, but which had the opposite effect. The wind was playing with his ponytail. “Wherever your feet go, you’ll be secured the whole time. If you fall, the harness will catch you. If you get weak in the knees and want to give up, it’ll even bring you back to the start all on its own. And if you lose your nerve out there…well, then this probably isn’t the job for you anyway, right?”

They were soft, friendly words, but Lhundup felt like he had never heard anything more terrifying. He looked at Rogen in disbelief. Did he really have to do this? Was this really happening?

Then Luhkneppel went out onto the steel beam. The red-haired man had a smile on his face and looked blissful. He put one foot in front of the other, visibly unconcerned. The group was already applauding after the first meter and didn’t stop when—without wavering even once—he reached the small platform in midair.

“What’s the view from back there?” a middle-aged woman called out.

Luhkeppel held both hands up to his ears and shook his head.

“Too much wind,” Mack translated. “He can’t hear us. But if you really want to know the answer, Mademoiselle Curdin, why don’t you find out for yourself?”

As soon as he finished that sentence, he stepped over to her and held out another harness. Curdin, clearly of French origin, only hesitated for a moment.

Lhundup watched Luhkneppel’s return journey. The young, pale man moved with absolute assurance, showing not a hint of worry or fear. Quite the opposite: halfway along, he kneeled down on the beam, leaning on it with his right hand so that he could wave down at the world below him.

“Someone always pulls that routine,” Rogen murmured. “Last week, someone even tried to do a handstand. We had a hard time

getting him to stop. Can you imagine?" He laughed softly and shook his head.

Luhkneppel was barely back on solid ground before Curdin was fastened to the ropes and the second Stardust initiate set off. With every group member who braved the walk across the steel beam and was celebrated with jubilant cheers by the others, Lhundup's apprehension grew. Who was he kidding? He was definitely not one of these people. What was he doing with adventurers, among such devil-may-care sky dancers? If this was James Bond, then James Bond could keep to himself, thank you very much.

"I..." He swallowed, his mouth dry, and looked at Rogen. "I can't do this. Truly, I feel ill thinking about it."

The Scandinavian smiled. "Don't worry; nothing'll happen to you. Just try it."

"Just"? Excuse me, but what is that supposed to mean? Lhundup was about to make a retort when he heard Mack calling his name. When he turned around, all eyes were on him again.

"You're the last one, my friend," said Mack. "Initiate number fifteen. Make your initiate group proud and get out there!"

For a moment, Lhundup was too perplexed to react. Then he felt the American engineer's hands on his arms and legs as he was put into the security harness. "Wait, no...hold on..."

"You got this, man." Rogen gave him a nod of encouragement. "Easy as pie."

Lhundup felt sick. His heart was beating with a fervor that drowned out even the whistling wind, and instead of legs, he suddenly had unstable cotton swabs below his hips. Rogen's hand on his back and the others' friendly cheering accompanied—no, shoved him virtually to the edge of the floor.

Mack—didn't executioners normally remain anonymous?—clamped him into the mount. Then he gave a thumbs-up. "You can start."

Rogen checked the safety measures and nodded. “Be brave, number fifteen. Enjoy it.”

This tower holds secrets. Bai Jun’s voice echoed in Lhundup’s memory. *But happiness comes to those who know how to ignore their own little problems when they have to.*

Think of your uncle.

The wind pulled at his overalls as if trying to take him with it.

“It’s a piece of cake,” said Luhkneppel.

Lhundup’s intestines seemed to turn to stone.

“Like flying, only better,” said Curdin.

Rogen clapped him on the shoulder. “Don’t worry. Some of you just need a little encouragement.”

A split-second later, Lhundup heard hidden servomotors begin to whir in the bracket above his head. He gave a start, and the safety ropes pulled him forwards with gentle certainty, out onto the steel beam.

Heavens! Lhundup thought, aghast.

Then that’s exactly where he was standing—out among the heavens. The motors fell silent. At the same time, his new colleagues’ cheers surged behind him. In front of him was pure nothingness, interrupted only by a flat beam barely three handspans wide and a thin, white square at the end of it.

Lhundup opened his eyes as wide as he could. Then he looked down, only for a moment, and pressed his eyelids tightly together again. So far down, so horrifyingly far down. It wasn’t a world anymore, it was a colored smudge with no details. He held his breath and did not dare move a single muscle. His mouth went dry. His teeth clenched together as if they had never done anything else. His pulse was aiming to achieve a new speed record.

The cheering died down. All that remained was the whistling

wind. It pulled at Lhundup's hair, his clothes, and the ropes; it dried the ice-cold sweat on his brow. Even the fingers in his gloves were soaked with sweat. Strange what you noticed when you died.

"I don't think this is happening," Mack sighed somewhere among the wind. "Number fifteen, do you want to come back? Can you manage it on your own?"

He didn't reply. He couldn't move. The fear, which was all he could really hear anymore, insisted that even a single eyelash twitch could mean certain doom. Why hadn't he been born a teleporter? For someone like Sid González, this exercise would have been nothing. Sid would just *think* himself onto the platform and he'd already be there.

But this wasn't the Lakeside Institute, the home for mutants. This was a problem—*his* problem.

Fragments of thoughts drifted through his mind, repeating a mantra of terror in a seemingly endless loop: two thousand meters. And he was above them. Lhundup from Changtang, the herdsman. Bai Jun's secret agent. Two thousand meters. Two thousand meters.

Suddenly, he felt two pairs of hands on his arms. They pulled him back, and an arm wrapped around his waist, supporting him. When they let go, Lhundup sank to the floor. The naked shell of the building, where the wind whistled around the support columns and load-bearing walls, had him again. He felt like he had been reborn. His hands trembled.

"H... How far...outside...was I?" he asked with chattering teeth. He opened his eyes and looked at Rogen.

The other man smirked. "Hard to say. Maybe...twenty centimeters?" Then he laughed jovially, and the others joined in.

Even though it wasn't derogatory, insulting laughter, Lhundup felt like the biggest disappointment west of the Pacific. He couldn't do it. He'd failed at the admission ritual and lost the post that Bai Jun had arranged for him. He wouldn't be able to help build the Stardust Tower. He wouldn't be Jun's eyes and ears inside the

building. He was and remained a good-for-nothing, because he would be no use to Jun either.

He didn't belong here. James Bond? Hah! What had he been thinking?

Slowly, he clambered to his feet. "I guess I'll go back down again," he murmured, defeated, with a nod at Mack and Rogen.

The American engineer smiled, stepped over to him, and put an arm around his shoulders. "You do that, number fifteen! I'll tell them via my pod to give you an assignment there."

Lhundup stopped short. "An assignment? But…I failed! I can't do this."

"Wrong emphasis, my friend. You can't do *this*. But even the tallest tree has roots. Pretty deep ones in the Stardust Tower's case. Welcome to the crew, newbie!"

Lhundup's mouth was still hanging open when the cheers of congratulation had died down.

2.

In the Light of the Pale Brothers

Topsid

Night of the Three Moons

Eric Manoli was running for his life. Again.

“This way! Quick!”

Khatleen-Tarr’s waving lizard hand was like a lighthouse in a stormy sea. Eric turned to the right, where the young Topsidan and the flying lizard, Kikerren, were just fleeing through a hole in an unplastered building wall—and managed, at the very last moment, to avoid the city soldiers’ beam shots aimed at him.

Dammit.

The uniformed lizards were coming ever closer. Megh-Takarr, Topsid’s ruler, had sent them to stop the two fugitives. Since Manoli and Khatleen-Tarr had escaped Megh-Takarr’s clutches at the brothel called the Purple Nest and begun hurrying through the capital by night following the lead of a curious flying lizard, the soldiers had been on their tail.

“Tell me again,” Manoli wheezed once he had gone through the hole and out onto one of the ghetto’s other streets, “why we didn’t stay in your apartment.”

Khatleen-Tarr’s tongue shot out of her mouth several times in quick succession in a clear sign of confusion. “Because that’s the first place they’d have looked for us,” she replied while running. “If they know about it by now, that is...but we can’t risk assuming otherwise. We have to keep moving if we want to survive.”

“Oh, of course. That’s why.” Eric’s lungs burned. Every muscle in his strained body seemed to have decided to stage a united protest, and although he understood and even shared their chagrin, he

couldn't give into it. It would spell his death.

The three pursuers had been hot on their heels for several blocks now. Eric didn't need to see their helmets to know what they had already told all the other task forces over their helmet coms: the fugitive whore and her Arkonide were trying to push their way north and leave the ghetto.

A thought ran through his mind: *We need a new hiding place. One where Megh-Takarr's henchmen don't expect us to be because they don't know about it.*

The street was filled with Topsidans. They had been drawn there as much by the Festival of the Three Moons as the explosions. Everywhere he looked, Eric saw lizard faces, which he could only rarely read with any reliability even after the several weeks he had spent on their planet. Did these beings have a friendly disposition towards him, or would they give him up to the city guards at the first opportunity?

To be on the safe side, he made every effort to hide his decidedly unlizardlike features from them. He took Khatleen-Tarr's outstretched hand and let her lead the way.

A soldier appeared among the passersby. He pointed at them with a finger of his gloved right hand. "Hey! Over here!"

Khatleen-Tarr cursed. Then the energy beams buzzed once more.

"Stop! In the name of the despot!"

"Forget it!" snarled the young lizard woman, pushing Eric into the nearest building entrance that offered cover.

He found himself in a stairwell, where earth-colored walls competed with dark wood and the glow of burning torches in iron sconces. The sound of panicked shouting from the horrified masses resounded from outside.

"Up, Erikk! Third floor." Fear flickered in her eyes, but Khatleen-Tarr didn't give into it. "Trust me."

What other choice did he have? He was alone among aliens, the only human on a world whose authorities were doing everything in their power to catch him, and whose people—Khatleen-Tarr excluded—saw him as an Arkonide, and thus either a sideshow attraction or the Topsidans' archenemy personified.

The stairs creaked under their racing footsteps. Soldiers' roars filled the room. Apartment doors were flung open and terrified visages peered cautiously out onto the landing.

"They're up here!" an evidently cowardly older resident called down to the rapidly ascending guards, promptly earning an admonishing glance from her neighbor, who looked no younger. But the neighbor he did nothing to help the fugitives either.

Manoli sighed internally and drew on even deeper reserves of strength. Fear was a good motivator—that was true on any planet in the galaxy, he was sure.

Another beam blast hissed past them, hitting the wall right next to his shoulder. Chunks of stone rained to the floor, and Khir-Teyal's warm night air briefly smelled of ozone. Khatleen-Tarr gripped his hand tighter and kept dragging him up the steps. Her wheezing breath made it clear enough: if she didn't pull out some trump card she had hidden up her figurative sleeve, it was all over.

Then he saw the window. It was on the third-story level, right by the staircase, and it was wide open. Kikerren was already fluttering outside. When Manoli braved a glance, he saw that the building must be on a slope, as directly under them were only squatter and markedly shabbier-looking buildings.

"Stop!" came a striking soldierly tone from the second floor. "You're both under arrest!"

Manoli looked at the window, then back at Khatleen-Tarr. "Out?"

"Out."

Hand in hand, they jumped into the three-moon night—into the

unknown.

No, she would *not* cry! Not here and certainly not in front of him, dammit!

Khatleen-Tarr sat on the rusty plough and stared at the unplastered barn wall as if the answers would be hidden somewhere between the stones and mortar. As if the section of wall there would just slide away if only she wanted it hard enough.

The ground quaked again. Dust fluttered down from the gabled wooden roof and onto her shoulder. She ignored it.

“At least that one was farther away than the last one.”

After a brief rustling behind her, she felt the voice’s owner by her side again.

“Maybe that’s a good sign,” he continued. “Or it could be irrelevant. But I figure we have to think positive.”

She swallowed the retort on her tongue. She didn’t want to speak, didn’t want anything anymore—why didn’t Erikk-Mahnoli get that? Why didn’t he let her have a moment?

“Are you okay?”

Khatleen-Tarr stayed silent, wishing she was anywhere but here.

“Look, I…I don’t want to sound pushy or anything, but you don’t look all that healthy to me.”

The second he attempted to examine her, she turned her head and gave him an angry glare. “I. Am. Fine.”

Her quiet, warning tone seemed to make no impact.

“Right, and I’m the Azzurri’s star player,” he murmured, though he put his hands back down by his sides. “Honestly, I’m not trying to pester you. But…well, to be totally honest, you’re the only reference point I have in all this chaos. And it makes me

uncomfortable to see you so taciturn."

Khatleen-Tarr snorted. *Then your life is even more messed up than mine, belly slicer...*

They had at least thrown off the despot's soldiers for the moment. They had only found this barn, which had no more than the plough in its far corner, by sheer coincidence. The dilapidated building presumably came from the time when this part of the city consisted almost entirely of fields fertilized with sewage. It was little more than a windowless room with a tall, wide wooden door that was hanging off its hinges.

The barn was at the edge of the Khir-Teyal district, that dark and yet multicolored shimmering caricature of the metropolis, and whoever wasn't convinced that it had been abandoned for an eternity just by looking at it would soon know from the smell. Or, more accurately, the stench. Hanging over the mishmash of discarded farming equipment, half-molded grain waste, and old gravo containers was an odor that even the lowest employee of the city's sewers would have felt ashamed of if he had turned up at the Purple Nest smelling like that.

Eric slapped his palm against his thigh. "Are you as hungry as I am? I could eat half a pig. Do you have pigs on Topsid?"

"You don't have to do that," she said quietly. "You really don't."

"Do what?"

She heard the surprise in his voice but knew that it was feigned. It was part of his 'treatment.' "Entertain me. Distract me. Tempt me out of my cave." A sigh. "I'll come out again myself when I see fit."

Erikk looked at her. His mouth was silent, but his expression spoke volumes, at least in her imagination. *That's great,* remarked the characteristic brow furrows that she never got used to the sight of, *but by then, either Megh-Takarr's henchmen will have found us or the cold-bloods will have taken us out with their explosions.*

"I...need my downtime phases now and again, okay? It's just how

I am. They have nothing to do with you or anyone else." Khatleen-Tarr sensed that this one was as good as over. She found speaking easier again and even managed to force a weak smile. "So, pale-skin, what's the plan?"

Erikk looked as though he were reading her like a book. She hated him for that, at least a little. Typical healer... But he allowed the change of subject.

"We should be safe here for now," he asserted. "We wait until the worst of it outside is over, then we follow Kikerren to this Sharp-Eyes that Bismall-Kehn told us about."

Somewhere behind her forehead, something went *click*. Defiance, frustration, and fear formed into words and emerged into the barn's stinking air. "Absolutely not!"

"What? But that was our plan right from the—"

She raised her hand and started to count on her fingers. "I will *not* entrust myself to an animal's leadership. Especially not one owned by Bismall-Kehn, is that clear? Not to mention, I will *not* rely on aid from someone I've never even met, and who—"

"He's the one behind the dissidents' efforts," Eric interjected, as if that explained and justified everything. "And Kikerren literally just saved us. What else do you need to trust her?"

"It's an animal," Khatleen-Tarr repeated. "An eccentric dandy's pet, nothing more."

Kikerren, who was perching on one of the roof beams and peering outside through a crack in the wall, suddenly made a hissing noise that sounded as insulted as if she had understood the words.

Khatleen-Tarr went on undeterred. "And Sharp-Eyes is no more than a placeholder. No, Erikk, that's not enough. Who says Bismall-Kehn's mysterious mastermind will even win this battle? Sure, right now the cold-bloods are making a lot of noise outside, but what does that prove? Will it last? What if making this Sharp-Eyes our

goal means we're running straight to the losing team—out of the frying pan and into the fire?"

Again, she thought about just leaving the peculiar Arkonide behind and going on alone. But she had already decided against it hours ago and stood by her decision. Without her, he wouldn't survive the night.

Erikk crossed his arms in front of his chest stubbornly. "Even Ghak-Ruk, that sleazy criminal from the Sludge Pit, told me to find Sharp-Eyes, if you recall. But sure, if you have a better suggestion, I'm all ears."

Again, the flying lizard hissed. The healer looked up. The fluttering emerald green creature had moved right up close to the crack and was looking through it with such fixation that it was as if she wanted to make her two companions aware of something.

Erikk stopped. "What's she spotted?" he murmured, standing up and swinging himself up to rafters before Khatleen-Tarr could chide him exerting the effort; it cost him quite a bit, even though he looked fairly muscular. Presumably, the gravity was lower on his world.

The wood creaked precariously, barely able to take his weight, but, undaunted, he pushed himself forward to Kikerren's small opening in the wall. Then he peered through it.

"Forget it," Khatleen-Tarr rebuked. "I know this area. All that's in the direction you two are staring is the Groogwain plain, and behind that, the Omzrak mountain range. If we're going to flee that way, we might as well just shoot ourselves first. That'll save us some needless exertion."

She closed her eyes. Images from the Vega war, from her harrowing time in the military, awaited her in the darkness behind her eyelids, so she quickly opened them again—just in time to see her pale-skinned companion plunk to the floor beside her.

"What *wouldn't* be needless to you?" he asked, a little peevish, and stretched.

She lowered her gaze. The Arkonide must think her awfully harsh, and she didn't want that. After all, her feelings weren't his fault.

"We'll make a push for the spaceport," she said softly, hoping it sounded like an apology. "That's our best option. From there, we'll leave Kerh-Onf. And we'll set out *now*, not wait until the end of the cold-bloods' riot. The chaos out there is the best cover we could ask for. If there's smoke and banging everywhere, if the people celebrating the Festival of the Three Moons are flinging themselves along the streets in a panic—who'll notice two more among them?"

"You want to leave Topsid?" He looked at her with skepticism.

"What future do I have here? I can't go back to Bismall-Kehn in the Purple Nest, and I don't see any alternatives. For either of us."

"We can find a better option than death wherever we go..." he murmured, entirely lost in his thoughts for a moment. Then he shook his head. "Besides, that won't work. Megh-Takarr has closed off the spaceport by now, guaranteed, and we can't be the only ones trying to flee the unrest that way."

"All the better. The bigger the jostling crowds, the less attention a farmer and her Rrakass will attract."

"Her what?" His forehead took on those fascinating ridges again.

Khatleen-Tarr smirked. *Clueless little belly slicer.* "Come over here!" she told him, amused. "No, even closer."

He clearly didn't understand, but he obeyed. "Maybe *you* won't attract much attention out there, but what about me?"

She looked at him in silence. Then she stood up, brought her snout closer to his neck and darted her tongue at it quickly. "We'll make it work, my little...what did you call it earlier? Pig?"

Judging by his expression, he thought she had totally lost the plot.

Khatleen-Tarr stepped over to one of the storage containers and

looked inside. She had already inspected the containers, most of which had already been open shortly after their arrival in the barn, and had gradually formed a plan.

"Khat, what—"

"Shut your mouth and get undressed, man!" she interrupted in a mischievous tone. Funny how it always came down to the same thing.

Erikk's scale-free visage grew even paler than usual for a moment, but then he raised an eyebrow. "What's in the box?"

"Your new evening wardrobe, Mr. Arkonide," she replied, starting to take off her own clothes. With dubious credit to Bismall-Kehn's brothel rules, she wasn't wearing all that much anyway.

Not far above their heads, the flying lizard hissed again.

There's nothing there! Khatleen-Tarr thought to herself, mentally dismissing the creature and enjoying the certainty and drive that was suddenly flowing through her again. *From now on, I'm taking charge, you little critter.*

Somewhere outside, far beyond the barn walls, another explosive detonated. She decided to let it spur her on.

3.

On Foreign Shores

…and Khir-Teyal is as good as secured. I repeat: Khir-Teyal is as good as secured. The insurgents are drawing back, and… Oh, shit, no! HQ, it's an ambu—

The rest of the com transmission dissolved into static noise. Gihl-Khuan made a subtle motion with two of his fingers and the small transmitter in the tiny headset he wore in his outer ear grew quieter.

"Incompetents," he whispered snidely.

What did you expect? the familiar voice in his head replied. It sounded amused. *They're homeworlders, after all.*

Gihl-Khuan was about to say something back, but the queue he had joined for the grill stand was now behind him and not in front. He was up.

"One Bungerrt kebab, please," he ordered from the stocky stall attendant. "Extra spicy, if you don't mind."

The woman only grunted and turned around to retrieve the traditional dish from the smoldering grill stones.

Gihl-Khuan let his gaze sweep across the scene. If this alley was representative of Kerh-Onf as a whole, the city hadn't let the cold-bloods spoil the night's festivities after all. True, the crowds at the stands were nothing compared to prior years and had visibly receded since the dissidents' series of explosions had begun, but none of the vendors or performers could really complain. Even the clerics, who stood on walls and boxes heralding the wonder of life and the meaning of this special evening, had an impressively large number of listeners as always.

Homeworlders or not, Gihl-Khuan thought with the fascination of

a sociologist studying a culture foreign to him, *their defiance is admirable.* And although he looked invitingly at the armband, the disembodied voice in his mind refrained from commenting.

"Sauces are back there," said the heavyset woman, pulling him out of his meditations. She slammed a small wooden board onto her stand's counter. On it was a thin skewer holding noticeably fewer grilled insects—and far smaller ones—than the advertising holo above the stand had promised.

For a split-second, Gihl-Khuan wondered whether complaining about the clearly meager portion size would fit with his cover, but he decided against it. He wanted to move on, not become a sideshow.

"Thanks! And have a blessed festival. May the light of the three __"

"Yeah, yeah." The woman waved him off gruffly. "Next!"

Gihl-Khuan snorted with satisfaction and made way for more customers. With this kebab, he felt his facade was complete anyway. He had the symbol of the moons on his collar, was striving to imitate the gaze of a fascinated festival attendee, and let himself be carried along by the flow of people. He didn't need to do anything more than that, at least for the moment.

The rest, he left to the interface. The combination of the com receiver in his ear and the small rectangular 3D monitor mounted in front of his right eye brought the whole city straight to him. Even before he had left the apartment just over an hour ago, he had been observing and listening in on the city security forces' data stream.

The com transmissions—a sad mixture of premature self-congratulation, frustrated cursing, and strategic maneuvering of strike forces and hover gliders—had proven uninspiring so far. The images his equipment drew from the news feeds, however, and siphoned off unnoticed through the government network's many layers of security, gave a more-than-adequate overview of the current situation in the metropolis's streets. Gihl-Khuan saw scenes of panicked Topsidans fleeing from the ghetto, images of Sendschai-

Karth and other buildings in the government district, which was being patrolled with extra care right now, and many other parts of the city. They were all still images—he didn't have to demand more from the interface just yet—but more than adequate for his purposes. Wherever a city marshal or soldier's helmet camera transferred something to mission control, Gihl-Khuan had an unwitting informant.

The images on the tiny monitor changed so rapidly that an observer less qualified in the art of hunting would have been confounded for sure. But not him. And sooner or later, he knew from long years of experience, they would show him the information he was waiting for. *The trail.*

The Bungerrt in his left hand, he raised the receiver's volume again slightly with his right. At once, the chaos returned from the ether.

...can say with certainty that the government district isn't in the insurgents' sights yet, a deep voice was reporting. *Unfortunately, we still have no sign of the fugitives. A personal description of Khatleen-Tarr can be accessed via the data feed...*

With the security forces' useless declarations in his ears and the live images before his eyes, he turned a corner onto the next street. His feet carried him on and on, away from the residential tower and the food stands and deeper into the heart of the capital. Kerh-Onf was an architectural patchwork where historic quarters—the proud old buildings in the center—coexisted peacefully with modern skyscrapers, rocket-shaped towers with spherical protrusions.

Normally, these would be a sea of artificial lights. On this night, however, to honor the three moons, almost all lighting that wasn't of natural origin had been turned off. There was no place for artificial light in the festival of life.

Gihl-Khuan drew past the fires, lanterns, and torches, saw the dark facades, and felt as if he had landed in an entirely different place. A far more beautiful one.

"Almost like being back home, right?" he whispered, stunned by

how wistful those words made him feel.

The imaginary voice of his armband confirmed it. *We had no artificial light on Buntayn either.*

"We didn't *need* any."

He had never fully gotten used to the civilized world's multitude of technical achievements. Only the small Positronic he had worn on his wrist since childhood had been a real boon to him—and it had long since given up the ghost.

That didn't bother Gihl-Khuan, however. Yielding to an uncharacteristic streak of nostalgia, he still communicated with the irreparably damaged device in his mind. It had raised him in a way, back on Buntayn; for what had felt like an eternity, it had been his parents and mentor, a friend in the loneliness. After all, without the Positronic, he would never have survived two moon phases after the spacecraft crashed; either the hunger or the delirium would have claimed him.

The little armband and its admittedly limited yet immeasurably valuable data banks had taught him everything he needed to pull through until rescue came. Self-sufficiency. Strength. Topsidian values. By now, it may have been every bit as "dead" as the rest of the crew of the ill-fated Buntayn ship, but it remained his confidant, the only one Gihl-Khuan tolerated behind his hunter's facade. Sure, Megh-Takar had brought Gihl-Khuan, the boy from the wilderness, back into Topsidian society, but the armband Positronic was all the "family" he wanted or needed. The only one he'd ever had.

The hours passed, and the Pale Brothers, as the locals called the moons, followed their orbits in the firmament. They didn't care about explosions or runaway whores.

The hunter kept his eyes and ears open to both his direct environment and the one being transmitted to him, though on the surface he continued to play his role masterfully. He greeted people he passed, took in the artistic offerings, and acted just like any other nighttime reveler.

The crowd was defiant. They were standing up and refusing to let the festival be ruined by a few malcontents and their bombs. The traditional moon wanderers were still walking along the streets and daubing every door with the three chalk circles, the symbol of the festival. According to every one of their stories, everyone who was still celebrating was standing up to death with their stoic calm, at least on this special night.

However, the closer he got to the ghetto, the more Kerh-Onf's stubbornness, perceived as courage, gave way to a schizophrenic melange of fear and nervous anticipation. He could see it in the eyes and bearing of those he passed. The streets in this area were noticeably emptier, and here and there Gihl-Khuan could observe damage to buildings, holes yawning open in old walls, which hadn't been there that afternoon.

The cold-bloods, he knew, were campaigning for a measured approach to foreign policy. In their view, the despot's aggressive expansion would spell Topsid's doom. Not that long ago, they had just been a tiny collection of crazies, easily sneered at and dismissed. But then Megh-Takarr had ordered the invasion of the Vega system, for inexplicable reasons.

The Ferrons, mammals similar to the Arkonides, were technologically backward. They had nothing Topsid needed. The despot had pushed through with it despite his staff's opposition, and the invasion should have been no more than a glorified field exercise for the fleet. But it had failed, and the fleet had come back decimated and demoralized. Since then, tension had been growing in the despotate. Until tonight, when they had flared up into armed conflict...

Security forces were everywhere now. The uniformed guards, each wearing a bulky battledress with silver chest and shoulder armor, were standing on corners and walking through the crowd. Gihl-Khuan couldn't see through their mirrored visors, but he knew that the despot's men and women wouldn't let anything out of the ordinary go unnoticed. Just in case, he walked in the shadows a little more.

Just then, of all moments, the insurrection caught up with him.

“Mister.”

The voice sounded in his ear so quietly that at first he thought it was another figment of his imagination. Only when it repeated itself did he stop and peer into the darkness.

The narrow alley he had been strolling past was almost pitch-black. Neither torch nor moonlight illuminated the barely three-step-wide passage between an empty furrier’s workshop and an old theater.

“Mister. Help...” A coughing fit, no less quiet, followed the words, interrupting their speaker.

Gihl-Khuan reduced the security com volume again and looked back over his shoulder. Only when he was certain that no one else had heard the strange voice or was paying him any attention did he step into the alley.

“What happened?” he asked into the darkness.

A moment later, he saw the answer. On a small heap of garbage that must have amassed her over several years, a girl was lying on her back. Given how young and small she still was, few moon phases could have passed since she had return from the realm of hatchlings. She was wearing ceremonial clothes, meaning she belonged to one of the religious factions currently preaching their sermons to passersby in honor of the three-moon constellation. But the side of her chest embroidered with the Pale Brothers was soaked with blood.

Something hit her, Gihl-Khuan realized. Did this alley lead to Khir-Teyal? Had the girl fled from there to here, hoping for helping hands and safety, only to lose her last strength so close to her goal, barely a few steps away?

“Please,” she whimpered weakly. Her eyes were clouded over. Gihl-Khuan only needed one look at her face to know that she would never glimpse the Pale Brothers again, even if she did survive the night. “Please f...find a healer and...”

In all the lonely years on Buntayn, he had only seriously hurt himself twice. Both times, he had treated himself with the Positronic's help, and he drew on those experiences now. With familiar motions, he quickly assessed the child's injuries and changed his mind.

She can still make it, he realized. *The blood loss is considerable, but if she gets to a healer in the next few minutes...* He mentally retraced his most recent steps. Where had the last security guard been? To whom could he most quickly report the injured girl?

Respect life! the Positronic's voice rang in his head, reciting one of the clauses of the Social Directive, his people's social norms. Just like on Buntayn. *Maintain it where you can. Eliminate it only when it is unavoidable.*

The sentiment could not have been more fitting on this night. And Gihl-Khuan intended nothing else.

The girl gave a terrified start when he stood up from his crouching position again. A weak, clammy hand pressed against his forearm. "Don't...go."

"No need to worry. I'm only going back to the street quickly, you see? It's just over there. And then I'll bring a security guard. They'll take care of every—"

Gihl-Khuan fell silent. From one moment to the next, he had forgotten the world around him. Now he only had eyes for the picture that had just snuck onto the 3D monitor.

Where? he thought. *Where is that?*

He stopped the data stream to take a longer and more precise look at one of the captures. There was a street corner there. Shabby buildings. Few passersby. And was he mistaken or was there a thin column of smoke rising up into the night sky?

Close to an explosion, in other words. And judging by the buildings...

That was Khir-Teyal, no doubt about it. The two people Megh-Takarr was looking for hadn't left the ghetto yet! No wonder he

hadn't found them anywhere else.

"Mister..."

The dying child's breath rattled in her throat. Gihl-Khuan ignored her. For him, there was only the prey now. Nothing else.

So, you're Khatleen-Tarr, he thought, focusing on the figure in the freeze frame. She was pretty. Far prettier than Megh-Takarr's manhunt database had suggested. Far prettier than any other ghetto whore he knew. About one meter eighty tall, and slim. Glossy brown scales. A dream.

Compared to her, the *thing* by her side looked all the more ridiculous and—

The child's voice was growing weaker by the second. "Mister, pl...please."

Stress hormones shot through Gihl-Khuan's body. His fingertips tingled, as they always did when the hunt entered the critical phase. He quickly checked the timestamp on the image, called the map of the city to mind, and overlapped them to determine where he was most likely to catch the two mismatched figures.

You can still get there in time, the broken Positronic told him. *If you head there right now. And run. This alley leads there.*

"I'm sorry, little one," Gihl-Khuan aspirated. Then he shook off the child's clammy hand and ran into the darkness. Sometimes, especially during the hunt, it really *was* unavoidable.

Horses don't puke, thought Eric Manoli. *Stay in your role.* But that was easier said than done when the costume stank like this.

For about an hour now, he had been crawling on all fours next to his companion and was gradually starting to consider surrendering to Megh-Takarr's henchmen a viable alternative. At least dying, Manoli hoped, didn't smell so bad.

"You okay down there?"

Had his companion lost her mind? How was he supposed to know what sounds a Rrakass made? Neighing? Snorting?

Khatleen-Tarr laughed softly. “You can speak, Erikk,” she murmured. “If I ask you anything, I’ll wait for the exact moment no one’s coming towards us.”

“In that case: I’m doing great,” Manoli lied. Then he groaned. “Except that I’m crawling through the streets on an alien world buried in what feels like twenty kilograms of animal fur, can’t see the ground beneath my hands and knees, and would have long since regurgitated my dinner onto the sidewalk if I’d eaten any.”

Could it even get any worse? Sure, Perry and Reg would have mocked him relentlessly had they known about this undertaking. To his regret, however, they did not. Eric Manoli had set out weeks ago to find his friends, who had gone out looking for Crest and the Planet of Eternal Life. To do so, he had used the same means as them: one of the transmitters that had been mysteriously left in the Vega system.

Manoli had gone through the transmitter alone—and found himself on Topsid. What had happened after that, he still only remembered fragments of. Topsidans had interrogated him, tortured him. He had gotten away from them—how was still hazy—and found refuge in the Purple Nest. Until the despot had picked up his trail…

Manoli wondered what had become of Perry, Reg, and their crewmates. Had they also ended up on Topsid? Had they found the Planet of Eternal Life? Or were they long dead? Would they—or he—ever see Terrania again? Or had the grand dream they had all shared since the *Stardust*’s Moon voyage, and actually long before that, already turned to ash?

Khatleen-Tarr rapped on the stinking fur from above. “Let’s take a break, my brave little Rrakass! I think you need a moment to breathe.”

A few moments later, they were sitting in a small bog that formed the backyard of a residential tower. Thick foliage and dark,

bubbling puddles surrounded them. This hiding place stank even more than the fur from the barn container, but it hid them from curious eyes.

Marveling, Manoli looked up at the tower's outer wall. The structure, vaguely reminiscent of a stylized rocket, shone with a silvery gleam in the light of the rising sun. Not even the Stardust Tower back home in the Gobi could have held a candle to it.

The Topsidan helped Manoli out of the fur. She had put it on him personally in the barn—not without villainous glee—and affixed it to his joints, upper arms, thighs, and back using laces and a kind of sticky goo that looked a bit like manure and which Manoli didn't want to think about.

"How far now to the spaceport?"

Khatleen-Tarr closed her eyes. "Too far, if you ask me. At least on foot. If only we could find a glider..."

Twice, they had tried to steal one of the private vehicles left at the side of the road. The first time, they had at least managed to open the door but hadn't been able to start up the glider's Positronic. The second time, they had only just managed to escape capture by the security personnel who had rushed over after hearing the blaring alarm.

"I did suggest taking the 'subway.'"

The Topsidan shook her head and smoothed her outfit's skirt; it was made of fabric, leather, and whatever threadbare farmer's rags had been on hand. "I suppose on Arkon, farm animals travel on public transport all the time, yes?"

Okay, that was one argument. On the other hand, had it been his idea to crawl through Kerh-Onf's streets disguised as a Rrakass? Manoli pursed his lips. Doubt was making its way up through his throat, and he didn't want to allow it any space to exit. It was no help to anyone.

Have I ever been farther away from everything I know? Felt more

alien?

"Hang in there, Erikk," Khatleen-Tarr said quietly, giving him a weak Topsidian smile. "I hate to say this, but: follow her example." She pointed upward, where, a little way above both of their heads, Kikerren was flying joyfully through the air, snatching at moonbeams. "Pessimists only rarely leave the battlefield as victors."

Manoli briefly lowered his gaze. He knew she was right. "Hey, I'm the one who cheers people up here. Did you forget?"

"Then I guess we're even." Sly humor glistened in her eyes. He didn't have to be a Topsidan to recognize it. "Let's say you weren't here, but on your world. What would you do right now?"

He raised his eyebrows. He hadn't expected this change of subject. "I, uh..."

"Don't think; answer. What would you do?"

Manoli thought of Terrania, of the clinic he had set up with Frank Haggard and Ara Fulkar, the Lakeside Institute, where they researched the mutants' parapsychic gifts.

"What I always do. Help the sick as best as I can."

"Sounds good. Sounds *important.*" She looked at him with her odd lizard eyes. "Sounds like your home needs you. For the future."

"The future." *Does Terrania still have one? Who knows what's happened on Earth since I left? Is Perry's desert refuge even still there?*

"Fight for it. Fight to make that future a reality. If you give up, you're giving that up too."

A memory rose into his consciousness. Rhodan's historic words, spoken in front of the *Stardust* after it landed in the Gobi and transmitted worldwide:

"Here, the city of Terrania will emerge, not built on sand but on your energy and confidence. It will be independent of national states and alliances, committed only to the goal of paving the way for our kind into

space. Join us in creating this vision! Come to Terrania!"

Manoli drew a deep breath, tilted his head back, and looked skyward. The three moons were gradually growing paler as the new day slowly took over the firmament.

"The port is still east of us?" he asked quietly.

Khatleen-Tarr confirmed.

"All right. Then let's go."

Silently, they set out, the Topsidan fully embodying her role again, and the human on all fours. Kikerren seemed to have gotten tired of playing with the rays of light; instead of flying, she was now taking a rest on the fake Rrakass's back.

"Breeding stock *and* beast of burden. Good job, Erikk. Good job."

He could have kicked her, but he was too afraid of ruining their shared disguise.

Less than half an hour later, he was staring into the hate-filled eyes of a guard.

4.

Stardust's Roots

Terrania

January 12, 2037

Lhundup was in hell. Worse: he was actively helping to build it. The weight of the equipment in his hands was dragging him down, and whenever he activated it and used it to mistreat the walls of the passages cut into the ground, it shook him to the core. As the device set about its work with compressed air, lubricating oil, and hard steel, it was as if it was not just churning up the stony ground below the Stardust Tower, but also taking the young man who had the audacity to wield it and forcing him to his knees.

The air smelled of dust, sweat, and exhaustion. The passageways were dark and narrow, the sun little more than a memory after only a few hours' work. And it was *loud*; even the headphones and earplugs that Lhundup's new foreman and shift manager Ai Guo had pressed into his hands made no difference.

This was not James Bond. This was a punishment. A sentence. Hadn't politically inconvenient people from his homeland been condemned to similar hardship in decades past?

Lhundup groaned softly as he sank onto a bench for his break. Every single muscle hurt. Was he imagining it, or had the loud vibrations loosened one of his teeth? He had rarely longed for the endless vastness of his Tibetan home more than at this moment.

The shabby tables and benches at which the miners enjoyed their all-too-short and all-too-rare relaxation phases during shifts—too short to make it worth the return journey to the subterranean sleeping berths—were located next to the elevator that conveyed the crewmates underground to start their shifts, then back up to reality at the end, after the typically several-day deployments. There was never a moment's peace, as the cramped elevator,

surrounded by robust, close-meshed grilles, was always in motion for some reason or other. But after four hours of hammering and pounding on the “front line,” as Lhundup secretly called his post, where digging and blasting were the order of the day, even the elevator’s squeaking and humming was a welcome change of pace.

“Is this seat taken?”

Lhundup looked up and his heart skipped a beat. The electric lights’ murky glow fell on a face that he was certain he had never seen in this hellscape before. He would have remembered it.

She had black hair cut short in a boyish style and almond-shaped eyes that a man could die for. Her mouth was small, and her smile produced unfathomably bewitching dimples at its corners. Her skin was as clear and perfect as—

“Hello? Do you understand me?”

Only when she laughed did Lhundup realize he’d been staring at her instead of replying. Was he even capable of speaking?

“Uh…”

Evidently not.

Terrania’s most beautiful woman looked at him for a moment. The other tables were empty, as Lhundup had accustomed himself to avoiding his colleagues, ignoring the regular break times, and eating alone. Except for him—and her—there was no one there.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” said the most beautiful woman in the world. She was speaking Mandarin and appeared to be Chinese, and Lhundup thanked every god he could think of that he had command of the language, even if he had once fought tooth and nail against having to learn it.

“You’re new around here, right?” Delicate fingers emerged from under her dirt-smeared gloves and rummaged through the silver backpack she had set down beside her. “At least, I’ve never noticed you before. You want some?” She produced a thermos from the bag; the coffee she poured smelled strong and good.

Lhundup hesitated. The drink didn't quite seem to match her, he thought. True, Terrania was an international melting pot, but he had never seen any of his Asian colleagues drinking the dark bean brew.

"I shouldn't drink so much of it, but what can I do? I like the taste." Her smile was radiant and would have disarmed even a Fantan. She sipped her coffee. "So, yes or no? Don't like talking much, do you?"

Lhundup shook his head. He actually *loved* talking, but how did you talk to a goddess? What gave him, a dirty, sweaty herdsman, considered an outcast and weakling even among the lowermost tower workers, the right to address her?

The most beautiful woman in this and all other worlds, smiled again. Her gaze went to his apple, which he hadn't bitten into again since her arrival, frozen in shock as he was.

"You're eating outside of an official break time," she warned him. "Don't let old Ai Guo hear about it."

He knows. It was his idea. To deescalate the situation. More and more sentences formed in his mind and tried to find their way to his mouth, which failed to give voice to them. Would she reject him like the rest of the building crew when he told her how often he got the others' hackles up? How often he'd disrupted the detonations and other work below the Stardust Tower with his unintentional clumsiness since his arrival?

"I was just trying to be nice," said the most beautiful woman in the universe, quietly and even a little disappointed. She emptied the cup of coffee in one gulp and put the flask away again. "I have seen you before, actually. And I can imagine why you've staggered your break times, and I think it's really unfair how the others are treating you. So...oh, forget it. Sorry for bothering you." She stood up and turned to go."

"Lhundup."

"What?" She looked back, puzzled.

“That... That’s my name,” he quickly added before his mouth ossified again. Every word felt like a battle of wills against an army of hang-ups and complexes. “Lhundup. And...I’d love some coffee, please!”

Somewhere behind his forehead, the reproachful voice of self doubt waited for a bolt of lightning to strike and punish him for his blasphemous arrogance. But none came. Instead, the most beautiful woman of all possible dimensions came back to his table. The gods must have lost their minds.

“Pleased to meet you, Lhundup. I’m Zhuo Hui. And I’m new here too. Milk and sugar?”

She sat down again, and they drank while Zhuo Hui talked. After just a few words, Lhundup could only hear her voice, as if his mind had tuned out all the noise.

Zhuo Hui was one of the blasters, he learned. They did the rough work, then Lhundup and his colleagues took care of the finer work. She had originally wanted to be a diplomat and had even started a political science degree in Shenzhen, where she came from. But then Perry Rhodan had happened. Terrania had been founded, and a new era had begun. One where new rules would apply.

“I guess this is diplomacy too,” she said, looking around with a chuckle. “Interstellar rather than international. The start of something big. Don’t you agree?”

Lhundup readily agreed with her. He understood what she meant, though at this moment he would presumably have been convinced even if she had dubbed herself queen of the Vega system and demanded a tax on every match in every matchbox. Goddesses were infallible, and he was, undeniably, head over heels in love. Even the chiding voice of his self-doubt realized that.

Zhuo meant “outstanding,” while Hui was a Chinese word for “intelligence.” An appropriate name, Lhundup thought, awed.

Somewhere beyond all this, heavy rocks rumbled in bulky anti-grav wagons over a network of magnet tracks. The angry cry of

explosions echoed through cramped, stifling passageways. Soil defeated by the team's progress trickled onto the helmets and overalls of those toiling away to make space below Terrania's tallest building for concrete and steel foundations. Lhundup was sitting right in the middle of all this noise, and yet it felt so far away from him that it could have been happening on an Arkonide moon.

"Would... Would you like a piece of apple?" he asked, holding it out to her—before widening his eyes in horror as he realized that in his nervous state, he'd practically eaten the whole thing already. He was offering the most beautiful women of all times past, and all those to come, little more than a core and a stem.

Zhuo Hui laughed. "If I say yes, what then? Will you go up to the surface and pick me one? In the middle of the desert?"

Lhundup flushed red and promised to do exactly that.

"But that's impossible."

"Doesn't matter."

"Ai Guo would shout at you."

And Bai Jun. "Doesn't matter."

For a moment, she looked at him in silence. Something flickered in her deep blue eyes that Lhundup hadn't seen for a long time and struck him to the core in an unfathomably pleasant manner. "I'm glad I sat with you, Lhundup from the highland steppes," she then said softly. "And next time, I'll gladly eat a piece of apple. Now I have to get back to work."

The most beautiful woman of all, whose mere existence justified the big bang, stood up, donned her backpack, and walked past the empty tables and benches back into hell.

"W... Wait!" he called after her, amazed by his own audacity. "Where should I meet you? For next time."

The dimples returned as a smile danced on her lips. Was he mistaken or had a touch of worry suddenly found her gaze? "*I'll*

find *you*, Lhundup. Okay?"

Down here? In this chaos of semidarkness, dust, and sweating hulks? "That's not practical," he surmised, wondering where he had found the courage to talk to her like that. "Better for us to make a specific plan."

Zhuo Hui shook her picture-perfect head. There was no doubt anymore about the worry on her face. "I'll find you, Lhundup," she repeated. "I promise. Do me a favor and leave it at that, okay? I... Just don't come looking for me! Please." She smiled again, but the smile didn't find her eyes.

Lhundup just nodded as she vanished into the shadows. Although he didn't grasp the reason, he sensed that he had somehow gone too far.

"You did *what?*"

Bai Jun's voice, emerging from the small com unit, sounded as incredulous as it did angry.

"She's absolutely enchanting, Jun. Truly, you'd like her."

"Unbelievable. Absolutely unbelievable. Kid, you're supposed to be keeping your eyes and ears open for me! You're supposed to be digging into Adams's secrets. But what are you doing? Chasing after young women. I could just as well have sent that Flipper guy Bull is always talking about. He was supposed to be a total ladies' man too..."

Lhundup shifted even deeper into the rock fissure he was standing in. Here, far from the miners' sleeping berths and the night shift's work sites, no one would hear him anyway at this late hour, but it couldn't hurt to be on the safe side. He always came here deep in the night to report to his boss, and just like every other time, Jun's morose manner had left him deflated within a few sentences. Not for the first time, he regretted dragging himself out of bed only to be scolded.

“There just isn’t anything new to report,” he reiterated. “I haven’t seen the sun for days, let alone the above-ground part of the tower. Ai Guo is a nice enough guy, but all he does is make us dig. There’s a lot of time pressure, since they’re supposed to start lowering the first steel beams into the shafts in the next few weeks.” He sighed. These daily updates were really stressful, and on top of that, he was unbelievably tired.

“Well, then mingle with the people,” Bai Jun insisted. “Talk to them. Listen to them. Pick up little snippets of knowledge and deliver them to me. You must be able to find out *something*, dammit!”

Lhundup thought about his snoring colleagues in the sleeping quarters. “I don’t think they’ll talk to me. So far... Well, they’re all experienced miners, is my impression. They keep to themselves. To them, I’m less a colleague than a curiosity.” He declined to mention that a second pneumatic drill had died in his hands today because he just couldn’t remember how to handle them. Nor did he mention his fellow miners’ eyerolls and silent rebukes. Jun already knew how ill-suited he was to this work.

Bai Jun grew impatient. “Now, listen, Lhundup!” he snarled. “Tomorrow morning, you’re not going to throw yourself at the ladies for once, you’re going to listen. And you’d better have something to report tomorrow or you’ll be sorry. Have I made myself clear?”

Lhundup knew how irate Bai Jun could get. He swallowed, his throat dry. “But—”

“No buts!” the mayor interrupted. “Tomorrow you’re going to give me some information, and that’s that. Otherwise I might as well have sent Flipper.”

Lhundup furrowed his brow. “Forgive me, but...isn’t he dead?”

“Exactly,” Bai Jun growled, and cut the connection.

5.

The Cold-Bloods' Uprising

Topsid

Night of the Three Moons

"I think it might be a bomb!" Gihl-Khuan swallowed dryly and looked at the person before him through eyes wide with fright. "Right over there, behind that corner. Oh, please, hurry!"

The broad-shouldered guard nodded curtly but saved his energy for the sprint they then undertook together. Gihl-Khuan had approached this man in the despot's service at a barely frequented subway station, where he was watching traffic with two colleagues —both heavily built males in battledresses carrying large weapons, like him. That the guard had immediately come with Gihl-Khuan after the mere mention of a bomb was a testament to how nervous the city law enforcement must have been.

Rightly so, Gihl-Khuan felt. Even if it was for the wrong reasons.

"Right over here...yeah?" the man repeated, wheezing now—and did just as Gihl-Khuan had gambled on: he removed his helmet to breathe better.

Where would I be without rank amateurs? thought Gihl-Khuan. "That's right. It was this bulky, blinking thing, and it made such a strange buzzing noise."

They had left the street with its passersby far behind them. In this side alley, he didn't need to fear any unwanted witnesses. Still, he cast a quick glance over his shoulder to check before pulling the hidden beamer out of his three-moon robe.

The uniformed man turned pale. Realization crept onto his face. His left hand lifted up the helmet again to use the com receiver, while his right moved towards the weapon at his waist.

But Gihl-Khuan was quicker. He used the moment of surprise to his advantage; his finger jerked the trigger. A lightning-fast bolt emerged from the beamer's muzzle and hit the officer square in his unprotected forehead. The broad man moaned softly, then collapsed onto the paving stones, motionless.

Gihl-Khuan looked around again. The air was still clear. He quickly grabbed the stunned man under the arms and pulled him deeper into the building's shadow. It would be hours before he woke up and could sound the alarm. Most likely, his colleagues would find him before that.

Between bare walls and parked vehicles, Gihl-Khuan started phase two of his improvised plan: he took off his victim's battledress and slipped it on himself.

While he worked, he kept his eyes on the data stream the entire time via his headset. The situation was gradually running away from him since Khatleen-Tarr and her companion—who else was the ugliest Rrakass of all time supposed to be?—were clearly on their way to the spaceport. Ghil-Khuan knew it would take them half an eternity to board a transport there due to all the chaos, if they managed it at all, but that same chaos would offer excellent cover. If he wanted to catch them, he had to do it *before* they got there. And he already had an idea as to how.

"...the city guard strongly advises avoiding Khir-Teyal. The upper echelons of Sendschai-Karth suggest that revelers should focus on other, more central districts for their own safety.

By now, the celebrations in the southern swamp park are reaching their traditional climax. Let's go live to our reporter on the ground..."

The roadblock was at one end of a long alley with a wide path to the right, which led to one of the popular subterranean swamp caves. From this far distance, Gihl-Khuan could already see the soldiers walking around the vehicles, some of which were on the ground, others floating a little way above it. The uniformed figures wore battledresses like his and held beam and particle cannons that

were as hefty as they were imposing. Collectively, they checked the personal details of every passerby, scanned retinas, inspected truck beds, and compared their findings with data stored in the central database using their communicators. Overall, they gave an impression of diligent concentration. Perfect for Gihl-Khuan's purposes.

"Follow me!" he said, stepping confidently out of the shadows. "The fugitives have been sighted near the spaceport, and the security forces there request our immediate support."

The woman he had addressed, a young Topsidan of maybe forty, looked at him, perplexed. Through his visor, he could see the cluelessness in her eyes—but also that his rank insignia hadn't escaped her notice. He, or at least the man whose clothes he had stolen, was clearly in a position to be giving her orders.

"I don't understand," her voice squeaked in Gihl-Khuan's helmet speaker. "We didn't receive a request like that via the—"

"What escapes your attention on the com channels is not my problem," he interrupted gruffly. That was another piece of wisdom he had learned during his many years in exile on Buntayn: *The direct way is often the best one, and a confident demeanor can dispell even your own doubts.* "Your orders are clear, officer, are they not? Carry them out!"

Good boy, the broken Positronic in his imagination whispered with fatherly pride.

Gihl-Khuan enjoyed the praise. This gift of slipping into any role he wanted in the blink of an eye was his most valuable asset. It made him Megh-Takarr's best agent.

By this point, more of the guards had noticed him there. Half skeptical, half dutiful, they stepped closer. Some even adopted a decidedly military posture, which Gihl-Khuan registered with a mix of humor and disdain. Yes, he had chosen his victim in phase one very well indeed.

"What are your orders for us?" asked an older guardsman,

putting his beamer back into the holster at his waist and removing his helmet as respect demanded in this non-pressing situation. His dark scales gleamed in the glow cast by the field vehicles' halogen headlights. Judging by the symbols on his epaulets, he was in charge here.

Gihl-Khuan switched into his tried and true "Am I surrounded by idiots today?" tone. "As I already explained to your slow-witted colleague, spaceport security urgently needs more people. You've been commandeered as reinforcements, but you haven't shown up."

"This is the first I've heard about this," said the older man. "We were told to look for a deserter and a runaway Arko—"

"The deserter is *at* the spaceport!" Gihl-Khuan snapped. "But she won't be for long if you and your band of clueless dunces don't get your act together! And trust me, if Megh-Takarr finds out that those two got away because of you, I won't be the one he transfers to the sewers in a rage to go hunting for hatchlings. Have I made myself clear, Subcontroller?"

That hit home. The mixture of domineering manner, preempted arguments, and a threat of demotion visibly took the wind out of the officer's sails.

"Ch... Charr-Kobahl, sir," he stammered, instantly stripped of all his self-confidence. "Subcontroller Charr-Kobahl." Then he turned his colleague, his expression darkening. "You heard the controller, Skrollan-Bhul. Let these men and women board. We have to get to the port!"

Skrollan-Bhul, evidently something like his right-hand woman, looked unconvinced but bowed to the power of hierarchy without resisting. Within moments, she had dismantled the roadblock. Met with stunned gazes from festival attendees, the security forces hurried to their hovering vehicles. Trained reflexes determined every move now. No one moved individually; everything was in unison. Doors slid aside with a hiss to reveal an internal view of the minimally outfitted cabins, housing little more than seats and hardware.

Gihl-Khuan didn't wait for an invitation. He knew that the armored floating gliders were his one and only chance to stop his prey in their tracks. "Go!" he ordered the pilot of the first available glider as soon as he'd boarded it.

"But, Controller, the unit still isn't—"

"I said *go!*" he barked, shouting down the protests of the man at the blinking console.

"U-Understood, sir. I'll launch the vehicle."

Gloved hands glided over flexible holographic control panels. Signal lights came to life, and in his helmet speaker, which had automatically tuned in to the onboard electronics' frequency, Gihl-Khuan could hear the confirmatory beeps and hums of the propulsion unit checks. Then the glider set itself in motion. The airspace belonged to him, the hunter knew, as the despot had forbidden all non-military flight traffic in light of the unrest.

The vehicle, about eight paces long, four tall, and five wide, rose up from Kerh-Onf's streets. Through the rear window, Gihl-Khuan soon had a view of the city that was nothing to sniff at compared to the one from his balcony.

The airspace had grown emptier. The only gliders he spotted belonged to the security units. Even the fog, essentially a constant on Topsid, had subsided. Gihl-Khuan concentrated and looked above and between the buildings for dark columns of smoke rising from explosion fires. Was he mistaken or had they grown fewer in number? Maybe the dissidents had lost their nerve.

You don't really believe that, the defective Positronic chided him.

As usual, he agreed with the voice.

"...to the spaceport. Repeat: Unit D13 is en route to the spaceport. Spaceport, we request a status update."

Static.

“Spaceport here. Apart from hardly being able to catch our breath because of the crowds, we have no particular incidents to report. These explosions are a big pile of Rrakass dung, though, huh? Anyway, to what do we owe the honor of your visit, Unit D13?”

Static.

“No particu... Spaceport, we don’t understand. Are you saying you’ve already detained the fugitives?”

Static.

“Detained? D13, are you playing a little prank on us? Do you short-tailed roadblock-watchers have too little work to do? Listen, you, we’re so busy here that our scales are practically falling off, so if you think...”

The fake Rrakass threw off his furry disguise, reached for the beamer at Khatleen-Tarr’s waist, and fired wildly. Gihl-Khuan saw it in the 3D depiction his headset (now set to video footage mode) projected in front of his right eye. And he felt his heartbeat quickening.

Your time’s running out, the armband Positronic remarked. *That stupid Arkonide just threw his life away—and probably his pretty companion’s too.*

I know, he growled in his mind. “How much farther?”

The pilot looked at his displays. “In a straight line? Fifteen minutes to the coordinates you specified, Controller. Thirty to the spaceport.”

Thirty minutes. Far too long. Khatleen-Tarr and her scaleless idiot barely had thirty *seconds*.

Gihl-Khuan clenched his teeth so firmly that they ground together. It was the only way to keep the curse on the tip of his tongue from leaving his mouth. It would have been unbecoming of a Controller.

Thirty minutes. His prey was in immediate mortal danger, and

he, the hunter, was sitting in the cockpit of a tiny city guard transport, flying above one of Kehr-Onf's better residential districts towards the plain and the port, surrounded by Megh-Takarr's loyal order-takers.

The despot's words echoed in his ears: *"For all I care, you can rip out her scales one by one, then let her freeze to death out on the plain. Do whatever you like, but bring me the man, do you hear me? Bring him to me* alive!*"*

"Increase your speed!"

The pilot looked unnerved. "Sir, we're already flying at the maximum velocity permitted."

"*Increase it, I said!*"

Gihl-Khuan reached for the control console. He didn't know much about this type of transport, but he had observed the man over the past several minutes and felt that he'd gained a little practical experience. The propulsion units roared in protest as he demanded more from them in his impatience.

"Controller, we're pushing the limit," the pilot clamored. His tone indicated he was wavering between defiance and horror. "We... The rest of the convoy can't follow us if we don't clarify such changes with them in advance."

Gihl-Khuan ignored him, just as he was now ignoring the acoustic news and com transmissions. With his right eye, he watched the data stream, waiting for a new sighting of his prey. With his left, he looked out of the rear window and over Kerh-Onf's roofs, toward his goal. The hunt was threatening to slip away from him. Nothing else mattered now!

He stiffened as the cycle of images before his right eye came back to the street corner where he had seen the harlot and her companion. By now, the soldiers had gotten over their surprise and were engaged in a heated firefight with the pair. It was practically a miracle that Khatleen-Tarr and the Arkonide still breathed.

Suddenly, the pilot in the seat beside him began to shout. “Controller, we’re under attack! Activate the defensive shield, right n—”

The rest of his words were swallowed up by the explosion. All Gihl-Khuan felt was the transport vehicle shuddering and tipping over. Then the world turned black.

“...thus-far unconfirmed reports that a light transport vessel from the city guard was caught in an ambush by the cold-bloods. Whether the sneak attack led to casualties is still unknown but seems probable.

Eyewitnesses are reporting a fireball above the city, and...”

6.

Into the Darkness

Ten Minutes Earlier

"Not another step!" someone demanded imperiously. Manoli froze. What was happening in front of him? Thanks to the reeking fur he was smothered in, he hardly had a clue what was going on around him. He was dependent on his companion's guidance to avoid colliding blindly with walls, parked gliders, or the last night owls still on the streets.

"Good evening, Subcontroller," he heard Khatleen-Tarr saying. She sounded worried. "Is something wrong?"

Steps approached. Boots on hard cobblestones. *Military* boots.

This is not good. Not good at all. Eric began to sweat. *Merda!*

Through the pathetically small breathing hole Khatleen-Tarr's disguise afforded him, he saw uniformed legs. He didn't dare raise his head and scrutinize the aliens' faces. Again, he was painfully aware that he knew essentially nothing about the natural behavior of the farm animal species he was pretending to be.

"You're asking if something's wrong?" The subcontroller laughed.

Eric knew that laugh. He may have been about four centuries and billions of light-years away from the New York schoolyards where he had spent recess throughout his childhood, but the bullies who enjoyed victimizing those weaker than themselves adopted the same tone across the galaxy.

"Name!" demanded a second man's voice. Two of the uniformed legs stepped to the left and out of Manoli's view—where Khatleen-Tarr was standing.

"Listhaan-Trull, sir," she lied. "From the Angeelsen farm over in

Birr-Sborn." Then, more quietly, "Don't, please..."

"What brings a young thing like you here at this hour, Listhaan-Trull? Didn't you hear about the uprising on the com network? Or did you bend your elbow so much that you're too blind drunk to find your bed?"

Manoli tottered slightly when a body—*Khat!*—suddenly jostled against him from the left. What was happening here? What was he supposed to do?

The men seemed to be harassing her. She panted softly. "No, sir," he heard her whispering. "Please, let me—"

"My second asked you a question, farmgirl," the subcontroller huffed in front of Manoli. "What's a beauty like you doing on these streets at the crack of dawn? Especially with livestock in tow."

Fabric rustled. Someone whistled approvingly. Manoli wondered, not for the first time, how many people this subcontroller's entourage encompassed. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw something brown fall to the floor. He felt sick. Was that Khatleen-Tarr's cardigan?

"I'm just taking my animal to the freight collection point," she said. Her voice was trembling, although the young Topsidan was audibly striving for cool collectedness. "My master says it's to be taken to Trhol-Knarr, because it has the prollters and needs to recover in the country air. And...sir, I implore you. Take your hand away from there. I'm already promised to another..."

"Promised is not yet given," murmured someone behind the small patrol's commander. He was slurring his "s" sounds; presumably, he had indulged in the water pipe very enthusiastically tonight and was not in full control of his faculties anymore. "I think the Pale Brothers have given us a little present to help us honor them."

Further voices supported the drunken man's assertion. "Finish unwrapping our gift, Ragh-Tukurr!" a voice demanded.

Another added, “Exactly. She needs to show us what she’s got apart from this smelly creature.”

Manoli’s heart was beating into his throat. There were at least four soldiers, probably more. They were stronger than he was and undoubtedly better armed. What did he have on his side to make up for it? The element of surprise and their drunkenness.

Risky. Far too risky.

But did he have any other choice?

He was about to react when he heard Khatleen-Tarr again. The fear seemed to have left her voice and made way for a tone he remembered from the Purple Nest: one of submission. Playacting.

“Slowly, Second,” she beseeched, a little too harried to be believable. “You don’t have to force me. I... I’m more than willing to—”

“She’s *willing?*” The subcontroller sounded genuinely disappointed. “Second, you’re boring us.”

Then everything happened at once. Manoli saw more legs hurrying in Khatleen-Tarr’s direction, heard fabric ripping and his companion crying out in fright. And he saw red. With strength that he wouldn’t have thought himself capable of at this stage, he ripped the miserable Rrakrass costume off his head, shoulders, and torso. The laces tore under the force, and where the fur had been stuck to his bare back and arms, it even pulled out some of his body hair.

Manoli ignored the pain. Within a split-second, he had scoped out the situation. There were five soldiers, wearing the despot’s typical armored uniforms, but they had removed their helmets. Two of the men—the subcontroller and a young man so thin, Manoli’s eyes almost went right past him—were standing across from him in the shadow of a warehouse. The other three were “dealing with” Khatleen-Tarr, two of them holding her still while the third literally ripped the clothes from her body.

They all froze, dumbfounded, staring in bewilderment at what

they had thought was a Rrakras. Manoli, however, didn't waste time staring. As comprehension slowly dawned on the subcontroller's features, he had already reached for the officer's waist. The Topsidian beamer felt cool in his hand as he aimed it at Ragh-Tukurr, the man in front of Khatleen-Tarr.

Then he pulled the trigger. Only when he saw the beam's color did he know that the device was not set to kill, but to stun.

Ragh-Tukurr collapsed. The soldier of the despot lay on the paving stones, motionless.

For a heartbeat, all was still. Topsidans gawked, six-fingered lizard hands freezing in place in the cool morning air. Only the throbbing of blood in Manoli's ears told him that time hadn't stopped.

"The Arkonide!" barked the subcontroller.

Manoli reacted instantly. Giving no heed to his surroundings, he plunged to the ground—allowing him to narrowly avoid the guardsman's beam shot. As he fell, he drew his arm to the right. No sooner had he hit the dewy ground than his finger again curled around the trigger of the stolen weapon.

The small patrol's leader took a beam directly in the chest. He screamed for a moment—it sounded more angry than agonized—then tipped forward.

Manoli spun around and rolled out of the falling man's way. Then he tensed his leg muscles, pushed off from the pavement, and jumped to his feet again.

Or rather, he tried to. The animal fur, which still covered him up to his waist, got caught between his legs, and the wretchedly strong gravity that had weighed down his every motion since his arrival on Topsid took its toll as well. He had barely stood up before he lost his balance and staggered. The shot intended for the man behind the fallen leader's second-in-command missed its mark, and the uniformed drunkard immediately set about trying to enact his revenge.

“Erikk!” Khatleen-Tarr cried in horror.

Then Kikerren swooped down from the sky. Bismall-Kehn’s strong-willed pet appeared as if from nowhere, like a scaly avenging angel. Manoli only spotted the flying lizard when it had virtually reached its target: his enemy’s arm.

The man jerked back in alarm as Kikerren opened her small mouth and bit. Blood gushed from the soldier’s scaly wrist, soaking his uniform. He let out a ferocious curse.

Manoli saw his chance and took it. He had gone into a crouch to stabilize his fall. Now he raised the beam weapon again and pulled the trigger. The drunken man slumped to the ground at once. Kikerren almost looked a little disappointed.

And then there were two, Manoli thought. He whirled around and froze.

“Don’t you dare, Arkonide!” hissed the rightmost of the two men holding Khatleen-Tarr. His scales were as dark as the casing of the small particle weapon whose barrel he had pressed to the motionless woman’s temple. “One more move from you and this whore has flicked her tongue for the last time, you got it? Drop the weapon!”

Manoli swallowed, his throat dry. Khatleen-Tarr’s eyes were wide. The old farmhand clothes were hanging from her body in tatters. Her naked chest rose and fell only faintly, as if she didn’t dare take deep breaths for fear of provoking their enemy.

Meanwhile, the other soldier to her left went for Kikerren. The small flying lizard avoided his beam shots with no apparent difficulty and vanished behind a corner, quick as a flash.

“Drop it, I said!” the first man repeated. His hand twitched slightly, and the weapon in it instantly began to hum. Presumably, he had taken off the safety or otherwise made it action-ready somehow. Manoli recognized a threatening gesture when he saw one.

“Okay,” Manoli said quietly. He slowly went to his knees, holding out the beamer. “Whatever you say. We don’t want any trouble.”

Now, Kikerren, dammit! NOW!

The lizard could read minds—or at least, she did a good impression of it at this crucial moment. No sooner had Manoli formed the mental cry for help than the emerald green creature buzzed towards them again. The leftmost Topsidan, who was keeping his eyes peeled for her, hadn’t reckoned with this angle of attack. By the time he was conscious of her return, Kikerren had already bitten his comrade’s right calf.

The soldier screamed, and Manoli pulled the trigger. The beam didn’t strike where he had hoped. Instead of hitting the Topsidan square in the chest, it only grazed the man’s upper arm. The soldier didn’t fall; he only lurched, giddy. But he let go of Khatleen-Tarr. That would have to suffice.

“Back!” Manoli ordered, aiming the weapon directly at the Topsidan’s face. “Drop your weapon and take three steps back, do you hear me? I don’t want to hurt you, but I will if I have to.”

The man cast a nervous glance at his companion, but the latter was too dazed to rush to his aid. He had lost his particle weapon, and what little resistance he could muster with his bare hands was focused on a vain attempt at keeping the flying lizard at bay.

The soldier to Manoli’s left dropped his weapon and hostage. Then he raised his hands. “All right, Arkonide,” he grumbled.

“Go back farther. Even more. Come on!”

The Terran kicked the beam weapon aside. He knew that his spontaneous plan barely qualified as one. Already, Ragh-Tukurr was beginning to stir again. Before long, he would be on his feet. If they had any chance of escape, it was now!

“Come on!” he wheezed, grabbing Khatleen-Tarr’s hand. “We have to get out of here. Quick!”

The former pride of the nest just let him drag her away.

They ran as fast as their weary legs could manage. But it wasn't fast enough. Manoli didn't have to turn around to know it. He could hear it behind him, as the cool wind carried the soldiers' cries and the *clop clop clop* of their boot soles.

"Where…are you…trying to…go?" Khatleen-Tarr shouted next to him. The Topsidan had regained her composure to a certain extent. Her hands were pressed to her chest to hold the top section of her outfit together, and she continually looked left and right, keeping an eye out for more potential foes. Justifiably so, Manoli suspected. Ragh-Tukurr and the other soldiers had doubtless called for backup by now. All of Kerh-Onf likely knew where the two fugitives were.

Nothing was stirring yet among the buildings Manoli and his companion raced past. Only the remains of the prior day's festival—tarpaulins over desolate market stalls, trash littering empty streets—wavered in the wind.

"Erikk," said Khatleen-Tarr, pulling him out of his thoughts. "Where are we going?"

He pointed ahead. Kikerren was flying three steps in front of them through the ever-so-slowly awakening city, leading them onward. Khatleen-Tarr's eyes widened. She looked at Manoli as if he'd lost his mind.

She's already saved our bacon many times over, he sighed in his mind. *What else do you need to finally trust her?*

Khatleen-Tarr's aversion to the small creature was slowly becoming ridiculous. But Manoli lacked the energy to chide her for it.

Suddenly, Kikerren stopped in midair, fluttering wildly. Directly below the creature, Manoli saw a flat, dark square in the sidewalk. The shape, maybe eighty centimeters on each side, was rust brown and looked like it was made from some kind of iron. He had already seen many objects of this kind, in Khir-Teyal too, but so far had paid them no mind. They had always come across like manhole

covers to him.

Maybe that's exactly what they are, he realized.

Next to the possible entrance to the sewers, he came to a wheezing stop and crouched down. Sweat was streaming from all his pores. "Down here! Quick!"

Khatleen-Tarr blanched, grabbed him by the arm, and tried to drag him onward. "No, Erikk, we have to..."

Manoli gripped the square by two corners and lifted it up. It offered no resistance. Underneath it, a round opening appeared, wide enough for a Topsidan's body. Metal rungs on one side of the hole led down into pitch-black darkness.

Bingo!

"Erikk!" Khatleen-Tarr's voice took on an imploring tone. "You don't want this. Please believe me and *come on! Now!*"

Their pursuers' cries were getting louder by the second. It sounded like the angry soldiers could appear from behind the next corner at any moment, weapons raised. Kikerren hissed impatiently and dove into the subterranean darkness.

Manoli stood up, took a step towards the Topsidan, and looked deep into her eyes. Then he pointed in their pursuers' direction. "And you don't want *that* any more than I do."

Khatleen-Tarr shook her scaled head. She was afraid, even more than she had been in the soldiers' clutches. But there was no other way, and he knew that. They had reached a point where he couldn't have any regard for her strange whims anymore.

Rugh-Tukurr turned onto the street. Saw them. Aimed.

"Forgive me!" Manoli murmured. Then he wrapped an arm around Khatleen-Tarr's waist and jumped with her into the depths.

The universe tasted of blood, stank of burning, and sounded like

it was ruled by a sadistic demon: screams and explosions everywhere. Gihl-Khuan opened his eyes, groaning. It looked like that too, he confirmed.

Whichever way he turned, he saw fire. The inside of the glider had become an inferno. Its sides had holes the size of a man, their edges blazing white hot. All sorts of tech hung from the ceiling, visibly beyond saving. Warning lights were blinking on now-useless consoles, the last grasps of a dying Positronic. Cold vapor poured, hissing, out of tube-shaped conduits whose purpose he didn't understand. And not half a meter away from his face lay the nearest corpse.

Shot down, he realized. Nausea rose in him. He lowered his helmed head again, rested his palms flat on the floor of the cabin where he had come to, and forced the giddiness away. *Someone pulled us out of the sky. Someone with damn big weapons.*

That also explained the glider's slanted angle. More and more details of his environment made their way into Gihl-Khuan's fuddled consciousness. Not even the combat sounds wafting in from outside escaped his notice. Whatever had happened here, it was still going on.

Panting and coughing, he pushed himself up and waited for the pain—but none came. He saw the lifeless eyes of the pilot in the driver's seat and understood. Only he had survived the crash.

Again, murmured the armband Positronic in his mind, amused.

But it wasn't uninhabited Buntayn out there; that much was clear. Gihl-Khuan stared through the small cockpit's window but gained no new knowledge. The world was still spinning before his eyes, and the little he could make out beyond the ruined glider seemed to consist of nothing but smoke and shadows.

I have to get out of here!

Groaning, he reached for the dead pilot's beamer. Then he staggered towards the entry hatch on the right-hand wall. Barely five steps, but that was enough for him to flounder twice. He

pushed himself up again each time and stumbled on.

The technology was not on his side. He had to open the hatch manually, which took several minutes. He cut his stolen uniform gloves on the twisted edges, but he managed it.

Dazed, he stepped outside and looked right into the beam of an energy weapon surging past him. He cried out, reflexively whirled around in an uncoordinated motion, and sank to his knees.

Cautiously, he raised his left hand to his other arm. The protective suit's material was torn. The beam had missed by a minuscule distance, only grazing him. The nausea returned, banding together with pain. Gihl-Khuan trembled. Over the grinding of his clenched teeth, he heard wild roaring. Brusque military commands rang out into the impenetrable, seemingly all-encompassing smoke plumes. Exchanges of gunfire. The baying voice of Controller Charr-Kobahl. The death cry of his subordinate Skrollan-Bhul.

The pain ebbed away only slowly. Gihl-Khuan forced himself to focus. He couldn't stay disoriented any longer. Where was his own assailant? Why hadn't the gunman long since subdued his weakened enemy?

Gradually, he realized what must have happened. *That beam wasn't aiming for me in the first place. Whoever fired it doesn't know I'm here. I just had the bad luck of being in its trajectory.* Judging from the chaos around him, that sounded entirely plausible.

His armband's broken Positronic was palpably concerned. *Be glad that no one's spotted you yet. In your condition, you wouldn't last long in a firefight.*

Gihl-Khuan couldn't help agreeing. True, he didn't seem to have broken anything in the crash, nor taken any serious wounds from the grazing shot, but he felt anything but fighting fit.

I have to get out of here, he thought again.

Sirens rang out in the distance. A dark shadow flew over his

hiding place, then more shots followed, making the ground quake.

Gihl-Khuan crept farther back until he felt a building's cold wall at his back. Who was fighting against whom here? And, far more importantly, who was winning right now? He moved his fingers again, but the receiver in his ear canal remained silent. The screen in front of his eye showed him nothing anymore. The crash had damaged his headset, robbing him of his contact with the news and security networks. The hunter had no advantage anymore.

Guess I have to do it the old-fashioned way, he growled in his thoughts. In frustration, he yanked the helmet off, ridding himself of the previously valuable technology, and cast it aside without another look.

Behind his forehead, his thoughts came thick and fast as his razor-sharp wits came to life. He had been traveling with Megh-Takarr's soldiers, hadn't he? And their enemy was the insurgents, wasn't it? That was enough to clarify the fronts he found himself caught between, which left the question of which side was winning. Gihl-Khuan had no intention of throwing in his lot with the losers. Only winners survived.

The combat noises grew louder again. The air smelled of destruction. Gihl-Khuan heard footsteps coming closer, though not from the direction where Skrollan-Buhl had died (painfully, from the sounds of it). Did that mean something?

He darted his tongue in and out, sensing the air, and came to a decision, quickly peeling himself out of the stolen battledress. His face contorted; every motion of his arms, legs, tail, and battered ribcage still caused him quite a bit of pain. He didn't make a sound, however. Then he threw the protective gear behind him into the smoke clouds. It had served its purpose, and he didn't need it anymore. In these circumstances, it would only get in his way.

Gihl-Khuan waited just a moment. "F... Friend," he uttered as soon as the first cold-blood ran past his hiding place.

It was a fairly young man, muscular and with the fervor in his eyes of those who yearned for fundamental change. When he heard

Gihl-Khuan, he came to a puzzled stop and turned around. The weapon in his hand whirred softly as he aimed it at the injured man.

"Don't!" Gihl-Khuan raised his hand, pleading, playing his new role no less perfectly than the last. "I'm on your side."

Then he coughed blood onto the paving stones. As he got his breath back somewhat, the young dissident kneeled beside him and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Are you okay, brother?"

Gihl-Khuan nodded. "I'll manage. What... What happened?"

The cold-blood looked around. "I think you were a little too close to where this glider crashed. We'll have to see about getting you to a healer."

He believes me. Gihl-Khuan cheered internally, forgetting his pain for a moment. So, his talent hadn't left him. *He thinks I'm one of his group.* The three-moon outfit he still wore no doubt helped support the impression he was trying to give of an injured angry citizen.

"Healer? But the battle..."

The young man smiled. "You were unconscious for a while, huh?" he interrupted gently. "The battle's been won for ages—by us! Sharp-Eyes was totally right: D13 set out far too hastily, and its leadership was too weak to fend off our ambush. As soon as we pulled the first of their gliders out of the sky, it was already decided." His eyes gleamed. "The tides are turning, brother. Just wait and see. The Pale Brothers gave us more than just a festival this year. They were the framework through which our whole world is going to change!"

Gihl-Khuan doubted it. One skirmish didn't settle a war. Sheer excitement over this little victory seemed to have made the young man lose sight of the bigger picture.

"Anyway, let's get out of here!" the man urged. "The spaceport's not far, and Megh-Takarr probably has backup in the air already to

finish us off. We should be somewhere else when it gets here, don't you think?"

The hunter couldn't disagree. He readily let his rescuer help him up and lend him support while walking.

Their journey was a surprisingly short one. With a singleness of purpose that made a mockery of the poor visibility, the youth maneuvered them both through the chaos. Before Gihl-Khuan's eyes, the smoke thinned to reveal burning rubble, maimed corpses, and every manner of steel and stone...from the surrounding buildings, he immediately recognized. The rebels' fight against the unit designated D13 seemed to have badly affected them.

Then he froze.

Charr-Kobahl!

The security team's subcontroller was kneeling in the dirt at the end of the alley where his glider had gone down. Blood ran from his head. His hands had been yanked behind his back and bound with a cord made of thin, flexible plastic. And at his temple, a blade waited to end things.

"Who have you got there, Snarr-Bekher?" asked the woman holding the dagger, skepticism in her voice. She was quite old, wore plain, practical clothing, and had an expression that looked like it needed a weapons license.

The young man by Gihl-Khuan's side waved a dismissive hand. "No need to worry, Astheer-Tau. My friend here's not one of them. He was just in the wrong place at the wrong time and ended up on the receiving end. Where are the others?"

Astheer-Tau harrumphed. "Where do you think? On the way back to base. They're afraid of the despot's anger. Pack of wimps!"

"And you?" He looked at the woman but gestured toward the hostage kneeling before her.

"I'm going to finish what I came here to do," she replied, "what eight of our comrades gave their lives for today. I'm going to send

Sendschai-Karth a message in the only language they understand there."

Charr-Kobahl groaned as the knife in her right hand touched his scaly skin. The captured subcontroller's rib cage was rising and falling rapidly, but his mouth remained closed.

He won't give her the satisfaction of begging for his life, said the armband in Gihl-Khuan's thoughts. *He'd rather die like a man.*

The hunter swallowed. It was obvious that if the Topsidan woman had her way, the subcontroller's final hour had struck. *But he's not talking. Charr-Kobahl could blow my cover with ease. I put him in this situation. I gave the order that led to his subordinates' deaths. But instead of giving me up to the rebels, he says nothing?*

Look closer, the armband murmured.

Gihl-Khuan concentrated...and realized the truth. Charr-Kobahl was blind! Blood was swimming in his eyes. The battle that had cost him his soldiers and glider had also taken his sight. And his hope.

"Do it!" the subcontroller hissed through gritted teeth. His shoulders and tail were twitching with barely contained tension. "Get it over with already, you crazy old witch! What are you waiting for, huh? For Megh-Takarr to pay a ransom for—"

He would never finish that sentence. In a single, sudden motion, Astheer-Tau sank the long knife into his skull. To the hilt.

The subcontroller let out a startled gurgle, then collapsed. Gihl-Khuan swallowed. Only winners survived.

With frustration, he realized that he had lost his communicator. "Y... You don't happen to have a communicator, do you?" he asked his rescuer quietly. "I'd love to know if my family is okay."

Snarr-Bekher pulled one with the most rudimentary functionality out of his coat pocket. "Will this do for now? You should find better ones at the hospital, but until then..."

Gihl-Khuan nodded. "It'll be fine," he interrupted gratefully.

Snarr-Bekher set him down on the wall and stepped aside. He seemed to want to give the injured man some private space.

“But don’t take too long!” he warned. “Megh-Takarr’s henchmen are almost here, and you urgently need a healer.”

Gihl-Khuan was tempted to object to the latter. He felt the strength returning to his body with every passing second.

As soon as Snarr-Bekher had turned away and stepped over to the Astheer-Tau, the hunter activated the small communication device and contacted one of his informants. He had them everywhere. You couldn’t do Megh-Takarr’s dirty work without knowing the right people.

But he only resorted to them extremely reluctantly. For one thing, they were a variable he couldn’t control. For another, and far more importantly, he was used to working alone. *Being* alone.

Two minutes later, he knew what he wanted to know. His prey was still alive. Gihl-Khuan let out a tense breath.

The only question is, how long? the armband remarked. *They fled into the sewers, after all. If you ask me, that damn Arkonide will wish he’d ended up in the soldiers’ clutches.*

The sewers of all places!

Gihl-Khuan looked around. The alley was full of smoke. Visibly receding, to be sure, but still enough to provide cover to a runaway —assuming the runaway worked smoothly enough.

Both rebels were still preoccupied with Charr-Kobahl’s corpse and paying him no mind. He couldn’t make out anyone else.

Gihl-Khuan stole a beam weapon that had presumably belonged to Charr-Kobahl and was now lying on the street, took a deep breath, and disappeared into the smoke plumes.

7.

A Stab in the Dark

Terrania

January 15, 2037

Even in hell, there were moments of beauty. Lhundup realized that anew every time he was allowed to give his shift leader a hand. Ai Guo may have had many years—and a great deal of practical experience—on the young Tibetan, but he was the only one in the whole crew of diggers and shovelers who treated him like a crewmate. Since Lhundup's first day, the old man had used every free minute to instruct his newest charge in the esteemed tradition of mining. And although Lhundup instantly forgot half of the terminology and definitions he learned—what was a tram again, and what did you do with a chute?—Ai Guo lost neither patience nor conviction.

"I'll make a miner out of you yet, pipsqueak," he said whenever Lhundup dropped the ball again. "Just you wait." Then he'd stroke his always-stubbly chin with his calloused right hand, reach for his shovel again, and heave more stone into the anti-grav minecart. Lhundup couldn't recall ever seeing a fitter or more agile man over seventy. His name meant "patriot" and was, as Ai Guo had explained himself, one that many Chinese parents had burdened their newborns with at the end of the 1970s. After the Cultural Revolution, it had apparently matched the zeitgeist.

And *this* patriot had stories to tell. In the pauses while they waited for the next cart, he often spoke of days past: his time with the marines, his unspeakable time in the army—"far too standardized; they wanted stupid yes-men, not people with brains"—or in the coal shafts of his native China. His career path had been full of twists and turns.

"But they were good twists and turns, even the military ones," he said, laughing. "Because look where it led me. To the future of our

whole species, my friend."

They were standing by the magnetic tracks again. Three hours had passed since the shift had begun, and although Lhundup had slept like a rock last night, by now he felt like he'd worked for days without rest.

To his right, a shaft led deeper into Terrania's underworld, while to his left, the path led to a freight elevator where the stone being taken away was carried upward. What happened to it after that, he didn't know. All he did was fill the carts. So far, he had managed that pretty much without error and had decided not to risk that happy exception by asking questions about the details—questions that were possibly unwelcome and certainly ignorance-revealing.

"You know, I didn't think I'd end up in mining myself, actually," the old man told him, followed by a hearty cough. Sweat beaded on his forehead, matting his snow-white hair, and his dirty overalls boasted dark rings under the armpits. The breathing mask that was supposed to protect his airways from all the dust, but which had clearly come several decades too late, hung around his neck, as did the yellow sound-insulating earmuffs. "My father was a soldier, my grandfather was a soldier. I tried it too, but all that standing to attention and obeying orders just isn't my thing. At first, my old man made his disappointment pretty clear, but shall I tell you something, pipsqueak? In private, behind closed doors, he actually *praised* me. For my independence. For having my own mind and being ready to act on it in the face of all resistance."

Lhundup saw the empty cart approaching, sighed, and reached for his shovel again. In silence, they kept working, slaving away at the pile of stone. For every load that Lhundup heaved onto the ever-growing mountain inside the rail vehicle, Ai Guo added two—and markedly larger ones. But he gave no look or gesture to indicate he thought badly of the younger man for his weakness. Ai Guo wasn't like the others.

After barely an hour, they had done it. Once again, they could rest up for a few minutes while the minecart automatically jerked towards the freight elevator, where its successor was already awaiting deployment.

Lhundup leaned against the shaft wall to avoid collapsing from exhaustion. “How tall is this thing actually supposed to get?”

“The tower?” Ai Guo laughed softly. “Pipsqueak, I’ve been wondering that since I started digging here. Honestly? I don’t think anyone knows.”

Lhundup raised an eyebrow. This wasn’t how he had anticipated his research going. If even the foreman didn’t have the answers, how else could he hope to find them?

“How come? I mean, someone must have an overview.”

“Down here? Let me give you an old piece of mining wisdom for the road. We’re hired to dig, not to ask questions. We do what the people upstairs want us to do. Challenge the bosses and you’ll lose your job sooner than you think.”

“Hold on a sec. You’re one of the only ones here who has contact with the higher-ups. You coordinate us. You must know the plans.”

“As long as they’re within my field of activity, sure. But even so, only for the current construction phase.” Ai Guo sat down on the ground with a groan. “I can tell you what *we’re* doing. That’s about it.”

“And you’ve never asked? Really? You?” Lhundup could scarcely believe it. To him, Ai Guo was—all his mining skills aside—a total idealist. One of the people who burned fully and completely with the ideal of Terrania. That was the impression he gave every time he talked about the city and its founders. Could someone like that really be satisfied with a purely functional role, especially when he was actively working on the city’s emblem?

The old man snorted. “Asked? Pipsqueak, I like you. So I’ll let you in on a little secret, okay?”

Lhundup nodded. His eyes widened. Was this the day he would finally have something useful to report to Jun?

“To this day, I still haven’t even seen the faces of *the ones upstairs*. Not even my direct superior.”

“What?” Lhundup replied, taken aback. “But—”

“No but,” said the Chinese foreman with some regret. “I don’t get my instructions orally, and definitely not through direct contact with the people in charge. When we’re supposed to do something, the esteemed ladies and gentlemen tell me by sending a text message to my tablet. That’s all.”

“A message? And who are they, anyway? Who do these messages come from?”

Ai Guo shrugged. “I honestly don’t have the faintest clue, pipsqueak.”

The degree of secrecy surrounding this tower’s construction was getting more bewildering by the second—and more mysterious.

“From Adams?” Lhundup asked, more helpless than hopeful. “From Rhodan?”

Again, Ai Guo shrugged. “Maybe. They could just as easily come from Crest, from a Positronic, or from an overweight baker in a suburb of Mexico City. In other words, I don’t know. And I don’t ask. Partly because I doubt it’d achieve much, and partly because I’m not here to ask questions; I’m here to do my job.” He smiled when he noticed Lhundup’s stunned gaping, sighed again, and put a calloused hand on the young Tibetan’s shoulder. “But I know one thing, my friend, and it’s the most important thing of all: the miserable drudgery we do down here is important for the tower and all of Terrania. It’s important for the future.”

“Why?” Lhundup murmured. He felt like a thousand questions were swirling around inside him, and the sheer overload had made his mind pick the simplest. “Why is it important? Who says so?”

“Me.” Ai Guo grinned. “And since I’m your boss, that’ll have to be enough for you. But seriously, if our assignment wasn’t important, they wouldn’t ask us to do it. I’m convinced of that.”

His words resonated with a weight that left an impression on Lhundup. His whole life, he had never been as sure of anything as

this man was of his service here underneath the Stardust Tower.

The next minecart jerked towards them. The yellow light of the electric lamps on the tunnel ceiling reflected off its dented and scratched hull and the rails beside which the two men stood.

Ai Guo reached for his shovel again.

"How can you do it?" Lhundup asked quietly. He only became truly conscious of the question after he had already spoken it, but he continued immediately. "How can you sacrifice yourself for a project whose true meaning you can at most only guess at? How can you give everything even though you don't know anything? Not even where this is all leading."

The old Chinese man had already filled his shovel with stone and earth again, but he lowered it again now. His hands resting on the tool's handle, he stood and looked at Lhundup in silence for a moment. Then he smiled. "Just like you can."

Lhundup raised his eyebrows. "Me? But..." He fell silent as Ai Guo raised a defensive hand.

"Why are you here, Lhundup? In Terrania with us? Because you trust in Rhodan, in Adams and the others. In their vision." The old man's eyes held an infectious sparkle that almost made Lhundup forget the man's rattling lungs for a split-second. "Are those men perfect, infallible, all-knowing? Certainly not. They're people just like you and me, and I've done more than enough bad in my years to know that even good intentions aren't always enough to really do good. But I know—because I see it again every day with my own eyes—that Rhodan and his confidants are doing good. They're taking us farther as a whole species. They're taking us towards our destiny, if you'll forgive me the touch of pathos. Their intentions are noble, Lhundup, no matter how vague some of their methods might seem to us. For me, that's enough."

Lhundup gulped. All of a sudden, he felt almost like a traitor. Then he thought of Bai Jun and knew that what counted was the greater good, not this one moment. "Is there anyone here who seems weird to you?" he dutifully asked. "Or anything that makes

you hesitate to put your trust in this project?"

It was a stab in the dark, nothing more. But it was the only approach he had.

Ai Guo frowned. He sounded sad when he replied. "You don't want to know that, kid."

Huh? The breath caught in Lhundup's throat. Could he come out of this strange conversation with some kind of clue after all? "I don't understand..." he murmured.

"That girl. The new Chinese woman." The man heaved a shovel load of dirt into the cart as if that would let him avoid the words trying to force their way out of his mouth. "I've seen how you gawk at her when she walks past you. You like her." He raised a hand, cutting Lhundup's protest off at the pass. "You do. Don't deny it. I may be old, but I'm not blind."

Lhundup fell silent. Right now, there was nothing to say. *Zhuo Hui?* The worry on her features came into his mind again, and the feeling that he had been left with after their first—and thus far only—conversation. That odd feeling of having crossed a boundary she didn't want to let anyone past. Why?

"Listen to me, Lhundup. Something's not right about that woman." Ai Guo looked at him, and Lhundup found nothing but sincerity in his gaze. "She may make your head spin, and I know that she's not doing anything fishy, but...hmm, how should I put this? At my age, and with the life I have under my belt...sometimes you just know who you can trust and who you can't. And I'm sorry to say it, but I don't trust that young woman as far as I can throw her. You ask me, you should steer clear of her."

He suddenly remembered her curious words. "*I'll find you, Lhundup. Okay?"* And *"Do me a favor and leave it at that, okay? I... Just don't come looking for me! Please."*

He shook his head. *Impossible. Not Zhuo Hui. Her, of all people?* But he knew how wise Ai Guo was. He sensed how much deliberation must have gone into his warning. And hadn't Lhundup

himself had a strange feeling when he and Zhuo Hui had parted ways at the elevator?

Maybe I'm not the only James Bond down here, he realized. Ai Guo had planted an idea in his mind, and although Lhundup didn't like it, it was rapidly growing. He felt like someone had punched him in the stomach and poured a bucket of ice water over his clueless head at the same time—half defeated and half exhilarated. And flummoxed through and through.

"Steer clear of her, Lhundup!" the old man repeated. The hand on his shoulder squeezed gently in a fatherly gesture. "But if you don't manage that, at least keep your wits about you. Stay alert when she's near you. Will you promise me that?"

Lhundup nodded silently. He was still staring into space when Ai Guo finally started shoveling again.

8.

Robinson's Dream

Topsid

The Morning After the Festival

"Tell me about him."

Manoli flinched at the whisper from beside him. Khatleen-Tarr seemed to have regained at least a modicum of her assertiveness. That was good. "About who?" he murmured.

"This Rohbin-Sonn. Earlier, when we took a break, you said you feel like him. Who is he?"

Someone smarter than me, he sighed internally before promptly spreading his arms out to keep balance. The narrow subterranean passage was not only so dark that he couldn't see his hand in front of his eyes, it was also a paradise for any fans of uneven ground.

For about an hour now, Manoli and his Topsidian companion had been slinking through the stifling darkness. They had taken countless turns and detours, and by now were relatively sure they had thrown off Ragh-Tukurr and his team. However, Manoli doubted that they had been followed into the sewers at all—and he was wondering why.

"Robinson," he murmured. Undoubtedly, what Khatleen-Tarr wanted was not a lesson in Terran literature, but a distraction from the seemingly irrationally large fear she was holding on to, and he gladly gave her that.

"A character in a novel from my world. A story. It's set hundreds of years before I was born, long before we were technically advanced enough to travel the skies and stars. Robinson Crusoe journeyed over the seas. Staying at home wasn't enough for him—he sought adventure. And his wooden ship got caught in a storm

and shipwrecked."

Ice-cold water dripped from the passageway's low ceiling and ran down his back. Manoli shuddered.

"Keep talking!" Khatleen-Tarr urged in a whisper. She still sounded very tense. Since the pair of fugitives had entered the shafts and channels below Kehr-Onf, which evidently had no artificial light anywhere, she had been close to panic and palpably fighting against it. "Did he drown?"

Although there was no way for her to see it, Manoli shook his head. "He was stranded. On the coast of a desert island. After that, he spent many years in exile, all on his own. He waited for rescue, to be brought back to civilization, but no one came. The world thought he was dead."

"He was alone," the Topsidan murmured. "Alone in an unfamiliar place. Just like you. And he yearned to go back home. Like you."

They fell silent for a while, each lost in their own thoughts. Manoli had his arm outstretched and was feeling his way along the mold-slick wall. Judging by the scraping of her footsteps, Khatleen-Tarr was doing the same.

The capital's underworld had none of the exotic flair of the streets beyond the ghetto. Instead of smoothly clad towers that made even the Stardust Tower look antiquated, Kerh-Onf's sewers had a practically cavelike atmosphere. Water rushed, gratings blocked the way, and wherever Manoli stepped, he felt refuse beneath his feet. It was cramped everywhere, and the air was moist. If Kikerren, flying ahead with confidence bordering on arrogance, hadn't been stoically leading the way with the sound of her flapping wings, they would have been hopelessly lost in this horrible stinking darkness.

Who says we're not? echoed a malicious voice in his consciousness. He decided to ignore it.

"Did he manage it?"

Once again, it took him a moment to understand Khatleen-Tarr's question. Multitasking was apparently impossible when you were creeping through an alien world's cloacae and didn't know what might happen next. Impossible for him, at least.

"Crusoe? Yeah, he did. After..." He interrupted himself. *After half an eternity and many hardships. Hopefully he and I aren't* that *similar.* The analogy was all too apparent, sad as it was. He took a deep breath. "Let's change the subject, okay? You tell me something."

"Like what?"

Was he hearing things or had there been a hint of a sigh? He was about to suggest something trivial when he felt a hand on his chest.

"Psst!" Khatleen-Tarr hissed right in his ear.

He froze. Seconds passed as they stood motionless in the darkness, side by side, listening. Waiting. Even Kikerren, wherever the flying lizard may have been, didn't stir her small leathery wings. But nothing happened. The only sounds Manoli heard were the rushing of waste water in the flat canal beside them and the rapid pounding of his own heart.

Finally, the Topsidan relaxed again and pulled her hand away. "False alarm!" she whispered.

Okay, that's enough now. "Hey, I know a good discussion topic," he said, feigning quiet enthusiasm. "How about you finally tell me who or what is living down here?"

She said nothing.

"Come on, your fear is unmistakable. And it's contagious, honestly. If I'm about to walk into the open mouth of the five-headed sewage monster of Kerh-Onf, I at least want to know more about it." *And please let it not be a five-headed monster. Or anything similar.*

Kikerren fluttered again. Manoli listened closely to it. Not for the first time, he wondered about the supposed animal; its decisiveness and endurance felt like evidence that it possessed abilities beyond

those of a mere creature. He clung to this evidence, practically forcing himself to believe it. In the end, his life and Khatleen-Tarr's were in Kikerren's tiny clawed hands.

A moment later, the Topsidan started moving again. He followed her, mainly to avoid being left there alone. Never before had he so longed for them to happen past another sewer access point and be able to get out of there.

"Not a sewage monster," Khatleen-Tarr whispered curtly. "Hatchlings."

"Hatch-what?" The doctor's professional curiosity took command, supplanting his fear. Then he realized that he'd heard this word several times already since beginning his forced sojourn on his world. "Sounds like it has something to do with breeding grounds."

He could feel how much Khatleen-Tarr balked at talking about this. Her words were faltering, as if they concerned horrors that no one described, inherently kept forever secret. The owner of this voice next to him in the dark seemed to have barely anything in common with the upbeat, confident young lizard woman he had observed for weeks in Bismall-Kehn's pleasure house.

"Are you familiar with Topsidian reproduction, Erikk?" Khatleen-Tarr asked softly.

Manoli thought of the sights, sounds, and smells he'd witnessed at the Purple Nest. Of Chon-Doh's brutal behavior toward Khatleen-Tarr. "Well, I think I have a fairly accurate idea of how exactly you __"

"But do you know what happens after that?" she interrupted him, speaking briefly and brusquely. "When the offspring actually arrive?"

He answered in the negative. "If I had to guess, I'd go for eggs. You lay eggs, then incubate them." *At least, that's how it works for lizards on my world.* "It's never talked about, so I assume it's a taboo."

The tunnel took a turn to the right. As they followed it, Manoli stumbled again and fell into ice-cold sewage, waving his arms about uselessly. The channel wasn't especially deep. For a moment, he saw stars. He emerged and spat out a swill he decided he'd rather not think about in any more detail. Then he listened in the darkness again, waiting for a reaction from Khatleen-Tarr's monsters. But again, there was none.

Finally, Khatleen-Tarr grabbed him by the arm and pulled him back onto the narrow stone landing. Somewhere up ahead, Kikerren made quiet sounds that he could have sworn were the flying lizard's equivalent of a mocking cackle.

"Almost right," the Topsidan replied, mercifully overlooking his humiliating dip. "But we don't incubate them. Our clutches mature and hatch on their own."

Manoli stopped and threw his arms around his upper body to stop the shivering. He almost wanted the rest of his Rrakass fur back. "And then you come back and feed them?" he asked in a whisper quieter than the chattering of his teeth. "Or does someone else take care of the little ones?"

"The staff at our rearing stations," she answered quietly. "The hatchlings only join the society that exists outside of those stations after their first four years of life. Until then, they stay in the facilities' custody—if they survive."

Does that mean what I think it means? he marveled, aghast.

Khatleen-Tarr went on. "Judging by your silence, it works a little differently on Arkon. I thought so. But please don't judge prematurely. This selection process serves an important purpose."

"Selection process?" he echoed in disbelief. "You abandon your offspring and let them die in a rearing station, and you think that's totally all right?"

"They don't die. They mature." She said it as naturally she was talking about the sun rising or Bismall-Kehn's low IQ. "If nature lets someone survive, that proves they really *can* survive. Only then are

they a Topsidan."

Speechless, Manoli looked in the direction where he knew her to be. Different countries, different customs—that was how the saying went. And that was all well and good, but this was intentional disregard for the weak's right to life!

It's natural selection, he suddenly realized. *As barbaric as the process seems to me, here on Topsid, it's completely normal. My indignation is based on human standards. But maybe that's more my problem than hers?* He didn't know. Only one thing was clear: the Terrans would have to ask themselves some tough moral questions if they wanted to make it among alien populations for long. *Different world, different Darwin.*

"Survival of the fittest," he said, letting his curiosity take precedence again. Judgments could wait.

For a moment, it was as though he could *hear* his companion smirking.

"Exactly. In our world's early years, nature took care of that on its own. Ever since we stopped living in wet holes in the ground and started enjoying the blessings of civilization, our number of natural enemies has decreased significantly. We make up for that in the rearing stations through what we call "selection": in an artificially constructed environment, our hatchlings experience similar risks to the ones our ancestors did at the dawn of time, so that they develop their true potential."

Manoli blinked. "Hold on a sec…I'm the last one who'd complain about a digression into xenobiology—that goes without saying, given who I am—but what does this story have to do with us?" He spread his arms out until he was touching both sides of the narrow tunnel at once. "Is this one of your rearing stations? I feel confident in saying it's not."

"Rightly so." She darted her tongue in and out. "But sometimes…"

"Sometimes?" he asked when she didn't go on. He suspected this

would be that part that really made her uncomfortable.

"Sometimes, individual hatchlings break out of the rearing stations," she confessed in a murmur. As she did so, he felt her move a step closer to him. "Hatchlings are like wild animals, Erikk. You must understand that. Uncivilized creatures who have no knowledge of societal constraints. All they know is fighting. Might makes right. No scruples, no inhibitions, no morals."

How often is "sometimes"? he thought, worried, but didn't dare ask the question. Suddenly, he never wanted to make a sound ever again.

Khatleen-Tarr's voice was barely more than a wisp of breath, right up close to his ear. Manoli felt her trembling and knew that it wasn't just because of the cold. It had never been because of the cold. And it was infectious.

"These breakaways," he whispered. "They come...down here?"

"No one looks for them here," the woman by his side confirmed. "Because no Topsidan who still has all their faculties and wants to stay alive would risk coming down here. The sewers are their domain, not ours. They took it over generations ago. And they defend it more stubbornly than you can imagine."

As a child, Manoli had often stayed in summer camps in the mountains by the Canadian border. He had spent many nights around the campfire listening to scary stories told by the counselors. Silly fables about people stumbling into mentally challenged rednecks' hunting grounds. People who had woken the dragon, so to speak. Now he was reminded of those evenings, but the horrors back then had been pleasant ones, muffled by the knowledge that he was listening to fictional tales and would later be able to crawl into his warm, safe sleeping bag. This, however, was real. And warmth and safety were vain hopes.

Hatchlings. The word echoed in his mind. His imagination ran wild, showing him unwanted images of enormous lizards with milky white scales, hate-filled gazes, and razor-sharp fangs. *Their domain, not ours. Their domain, not ours.*

Manoli gulped. His knees went weak, every step an immense exertion of strength now. Although he knew well and good that he was only imagining it, he suddenly thought he could see shapes moving around in the all-encompassing darkness. It was like they were coming closer, directly towards him and Khatleen-Tarr—quickly, silently, and with deadly precision.

But that was total nonsense, of course.

Two seconds later, the nonsense jumped at him, yanking him off his feet. Manoli felt a foreign body next to him, *on* him, strong hands on his shoulders. Then the back of his head slammed against the rough wall and he lost consciousness.

The last thing he heard was Khatleen-Tarr's piercing scream.

9.

In the Dark Tunnel

Terrania

January 18, 2037

The small pod felt as heavy as lead, yet that was nothing compared to his eyelids. Lhundup grimaced as he established the connection to the world above. *So tired. So endlessly, horribly, deathly tired.*

“Ah, my good-for-nothing informant,” Bai Jun said. Even his greeting was a rebuke. He was in for a good time. “What’s the latest shocking news from underground? Did you find some rocks? Some dirt, even? Tell me, Lhundup. I can barely contain my curiosity.” A hearty yawn was the next thing to come out of the small speaker.

Lhundup pushed himself a touch deeper into the alcove. As ever, when he spoke to his employer from down here, he felt like he had a block of ice in his intestines and a sign hanging around his neck reading “Traitor.” One that he’d made himself.

“Good day, Mayor.”

“Day?” Bai Jun let out a brief, indignant laugh. He sounded sleepy and morose. “It’s two thirty in the morning. ‘Good night’ would have been far more appropriate. But how can it be ‘good’ when I’m sacrificing my hard-earned rest for your customary meaningless call, eh?”

As much as Lhundup understood Bai Jun’s frustrated ire, he found the former general’s one-sided thinking quite unfair. After all, Bai Jun wasn’t the only one who would rather be slumbering than having this phone call. *And I bet his work day wasn’t half as strenuous as mine. Physically, anyway.*

Even when he was lying peacefully in his bunk and waiting for

sleep, lulled by the snoring of the intimidating professional miners on the other beds, Lhundup felt as though his muscles were still going through the daily motions. Bend, pick, shovel, heave. Bend, pick, shovel, heave. Sometimes he even wished he could have the awful machinery back—the equipment he had never truly understood and ruined many of during his first few days. At least it would be a distraction. But when it came to mining, he clearly had two left hands; he couldn't deny that. And Ai Guo couldn't justify trusting his least capable charge with any tool more expensive than a pack of cigarettes. Not to the other crew members, and not to his mysterious superiors who communicated only via email.

It was true that everyone who wanted to could help build Terrania. But *Terrania* decided where and how. The individual, at least when they weren't part of Rhodan's inner circle, just nodded and got to work—in Lhundup's case, with muscle soreness that got worse by the day (wasn't that supposed to abate with time?) and a feeling that he'd aged thirty years in the space of a week. Mining was nothing like herding livestock. Even as a hostage of Buming, Ms. Unknown herself, he hadn't felt as used and abused as he did after a shift in Terrania's endless basement, as ridiculous as that sounded.

"Lhundup?" Bai Jun's voice sounded friendlier than before; the mayor seemed to have a guilty conscience over his prior words, which snapped the young Tiben out of his self-deprecating thoughts. "Apologies. You're only doing what I asked you to do. So, talk. What's new in the Stardust Tower?"

Lhundup sighed. There wasn't much, and most of it was little more than speculation and flights of fancy. "Ai Guo received new instructions. Via email, without any recognizable or traceable sender, same as always."

Jun swore under his breath. "What were the instructions?"

"The usual. Detonate, dig, and shovel, please. Today a little to the left, tomorrow a little to the right. We're assuming the next steel beams are already on standby and will be delivered soon so we can embed them in the ground."

Oh, those steel beams! The tower's absurdly heavy roots. *They* were a distraction Lhundup could have gladly done without.

"These emails..." Jun grunted, his frustration come to life. "I moved heaven and earth up here to try and find out their origin, but so far I keep running into walls of silence or cluelessness. Well, we won't get anywhere with that right now. Do you have more?"

"I guess," Lhundup replied, wavering. "In a manner of speaking. This morning I overheard Rob Gallagher and Yvette Labache talking about old Coletti. He's acting strangely, they thought. From their tone, they were accusing him of scheming some kind of sabotage."

"And?"

"False alarm. I kept an eye on Coletti all day. All he was secretly planning was a surprise Italian meal for his new girlfriend on the early shift—not that I have any idea how he plans to cook anything better than soup from a can down here."

The mayor groaned. It sounded like he was sitting up in bed. Once again, Lhundup wished he were back in his. It was pitch-dark in the empty passageways, and shockingly cold. He found it mind-boggling that only a few hundred meters separated him and Jun. It was like they were living in entirely separate worlds.

"Keep going!" Bai Jun urged.

"There's nothing to keep going with, Jun. Hinrichs from the second dorm is homesick and secretly calls his ex in Germany every night. The brutal Be—no idea what she's really called; that's what they call her here—had her advances rebuffed by Ebling, and since then she's been snapping at anyone who so much as looks at her." He'd had to learn this stream of inanities by heart to remember them at all and was now counting the individual items on the fingers of his ravaged hands. "Around noon today, a new arrival came from upstairs, a pimply kid called Jedich who I doubt will last more than two days. But do you really want to hear all this?" He somberly lowered his free right hand again.

Jun most certainly *did not* want that, and he expressed it

emphatically. “I want one hint, one truly relevant piece of information about Adams’s secret intentions. Your mining colleagues’ love lives don’t interest me.”

The lecture continued, but Lhundup let it go in one ear and out the other. He knew each sentence like the back of his hand by now, had heard them night after night, and yet...

He swallowed. Why exactly hadn’t he told Jun about Zhuo Hui? Because if no one knew about it, it wasn’t true? Because it wasn’t true if Lhundup didn’t want it to be? Zhuo Hui with the worried visage and Ai Guo’s staunch warning about her could in fact be the kind of clue Jun longed for. Or not, maybe, but at the very least, it was a change from the usual banal normality that filled his daily reports. Nevertheless, Lhundup balked at the idea of mentioning the entrancing yet unreadable woman whenever he spoke with the mayor.

“Lhundup? Hey, are you even listening?”

Blinking, he returned to the present. Bai Jun’s angry voice blared from the pod speaker. “What? Oh, uh, yes... Of course, Jun.”

“Mm-hmm,” the mayor grunted, and it sounded like a no. “And what do you say? Are you on board?”

With what? What was this about? *Ugh. Damn.* In his daydreaming, he’d apparently missed an important question. “Uh...” However hard he racked his brain, he didn’t know what Bai Jun wanted him to say. “Y... Yes?” he offered cautiously, more a question than an answer.

All of a sudden, Jun sounded wide awake, and deeply satisfied. “Fantastic. Then that’s agreed. Give me a few hours to put the necessary wheels in motion. I’ll be in touch with instructions as soon as it’s all arranged. Truly, Lhundup, this is the right step for you. A sorely needed one, if you ask me. I should have thought of it much sooner.” He was audibly relieved. “We’re sure to get somewhere with this.”

Lhundup’s eyes widened. Why did he feel like he’d just signed

his own death warrant? He really needed to learn to concentrate, dammit!

Before he could expose his failings by asking a follow-up question, Jun said goodbye and cut the connection. Lhundup was left standing there at a loss, cold earth at his back and darkness before his eyes. His heart pounded. Only after what felt like an eternity did he dare emerge from the alcove.

The tunnel was as dark as before. The workers employed in his area of the mine were lying on their bunks and sleeping. Lhundup crept back in towards his own. It had to be close to 3 am by now. At this hour, work would only be going on in the eastern areas of the subterranean cave system.

As Lhundup rejoined his colleagues, he occasionally heard a deep rumbling echoing from the eastward-leading corridor branches. These were the sounds of the night shift, who were—if he wasn't mistaken—conducting small-scale detonations. But even though he knew that, he couldn't keep his imagination from making its own sense of the dull clanging. In his mind's eye, he saw monstrous fire-breathing dragons stepping through the underground tunnels, huge scaled creatures with smoking nostrils, sulfurous breath, and wings of tautly stretched leather. He saw the flames of hell blazing in their obsidian-black eyes and the dried blood of defenseless victims stuck to their razor-sharp fangs.

They're coming for you, breathed the voice of unreason in his mind. *Now that they're done with the night shift crew, they're hungry for Tibetan secret agents. They want a 007 midnight feast.*

There was another rumbling in the distance. The noise wasn't loud enough to wake the sleeping miners, but it was sufficient to put ideas in Lhundup's overtired head. He quickened his pace.

Those people in the eastern tunnels dug too deep, you know? said the ominous voice. *They awakened something that was sleeping under the desert for eons. It spelled their death. And now it's running amok.*

Such nonsense! Why was his own mind telling him this bullshit? Why did Lhundup suddenly have all this fear to deal with?

Even though he knew better, he looked around, peering into the darkness, and listened closely. Was there truly nothing stirring nearby? Was there definitely not a monster in the shadows waiting for sleepless miners? He balled his hands into fists, swallowed dryly —and froze!

The darkness *was* moving.

For a moment, his heart stood still. In a state of shock, he stood and gaped. This was the end, wasn't it? The dragons were there. They were real, and...and...their enormous mouths would...

A light crunching accompanied delicate feet walking on the stony ground. *A person!* Lhundup realized it straight away, but it took a few seconds for his terrified mind to let him move again. This was no monster, but a fellow human. A member of the crew? At this hour? Whoever it was, they apparently weren't expecting company, since (in contrast to Lhundup) they weren't making any effort to walk with quiet, inconspicuous steps.

His thoughts raced. The room where his warm bed awaited was just a few dozen steps away, and yet a puzzle was lurking there in front of him in the darkness. Wasn't that exactly why he'd come here? He swallowed again, pushed down the longing for sleep, and gave chase.

The figure was moving with purpose, he quickly grasped that much despite the darkness, and they seemed to know the terrain very well indeed. Smoothly and swiftly, they turned corners, strode along tight tunnels, and climbed over equipment left out overnight. After just a few minutes in this person's slipstream, Lhundup had twice almost stepped in a pile of pickaxes and once almost tripped over the hover carts' magnetic tracks. He had only regained his footing at the last second and with pure luck, yet the unknown figure a few meters ahead of him continued as capably and unwaveringly as if they could see in the dark. In all likelihood, they actually could.

This guy's wearing night vision goggles, it suddenly occurred to him. *What else?* Why hadn't he thought of that sooner?

They were approaching the break area and the elevator. Lhundup paused. What would someone be doing there of all places? As in the rest of the western sector, there would be nothing there at this time except gaping emptiness, and the elevator could only be used with a special key stick that only the shift foremen had.

Lhundup decided to be even more vigilant. When they had almost reached the underground break room, he fell back a little, pressed himself close up against the rough stone wall, and peered into the night in front of him. About five meters ahead, the corridor led into the room. There, right by the elevator shaft's yellow outer grating, hung a single rugged LED lamp. Someone must have forgotten to switch it off, since it still blazed, though it flickered at frequent, irregular intervals. Not long and the light fixture, probably suffering in the subterranean conditions as Lhundup was, would give up the ghost. Death through nonstop usage. But for now, it still worked. And he couldn't believe his eyes when he finally saw who he was following.

Zhuo Hui was wearing a pitch-black, tight-fitting catsuit and gloves. A wide black belt with several small pockets hung around her narrow waist. Her hair was tied into a tiny ponytail. To the right of the two metal pillars propping up the ceiling at the tunnel's end, she came to a stop, took one quick look left and right, then—when she found no unwanted observers—scurried into the break room. Two steps later, she had vanished from sight.

What in the world was happening here? Zhuo Hui of all people?

Lhundup waited two heartbeats, then pushed himself away from the wall, crept forward those five meters, and turned the corner as well. A split-second later, a steely hand grabbed him by the throat and shoved him backwards against the elevator bars! Lhundup gasped in alarm and suddenly felt cold, deadly metal against his throat.

"What's this about, huh?" Zhuo Hui whispered angrily. "You've been on my heels for twenty minutes. Why? You in the mood?"

For a moment, he was too perplexed and dismayed to understand what she meant. Then he raised his trembling hands defensively.

“N... No, of course not, I...”

“Spare me your lies!” she snarled at him. He’d never heard anyone whisper so aggressively before. Rage burned in her picture-perfect eyes. “It’s the middle of the night. Either you’re stalking me or...” She hesitated.

Lhundup knew this hesitation. That was how people acted when they realized something that still eluded him.

“Lhundup, Lhundup,” Zhuo Hui murmured. It sounded half amazed and half disappointed. “I’ll temper justice with mercy and act like this never happened. But I promise you: if I ever have the feeling you’re mixing yourself up in my business again, I won’t hold back, understood? These caves are long and deep, my friend. Do you know how quickly someone can have a tragic accident around here?”

The blade disappeared and the hand let him go. Lhundup gulped, then gasped for air; he had hardly even dared to breathe in until now. Helpless and overwhelmed, he looked at Zhuo Hui. “Please, you’ve got it all wrong,” he said softly. “I had no idea it was you. I just saw someone sneaking around and...”

The young woman took a few steps back and shook her pretty head emphatically. “You heard what I said. If you know what’s good for you, you’ll follow it.” The hand holding the knife jerked to the right, briefly pointing in the direction of the corridor they had entered through. “Now get out of here, okay? Leave me in peace!”

Looking back, Lhundup wouldn’t have been able to say what exactly it came down to. Her firm tone? Her angry gaze? The whole surreal situation? But at this moment, he could do nothing other than follow Zhuo Hui’s instruction. Rarely had he ever felt so confused.

At the entrance to the corridor, he stopped and turned around again, but the flickering lamplight fell on an empty room. Zhuo Hui had disappeared without a sound.

He sighed and was about to start moving when the small pod in

his overalls pocket began to buzz. He blinked. When he pulled out the pod, Bai Jun's name was emblazoned on the display.

Lhundup tapped it to take the call. "J... Jun?"

"Good news, Lhundup!" came the mayor's voice. "Despite the inhuman hour, I've pretty much taken care of my side of our preparations. Amazing what you can achieve if you know the right people and they owe you a favor, isn't it?" He laughed briefly.

Preparations? Lhundup furrowed his brow. He had virtually forgotten their conversation. Now it came back to him—along with the rash agreement he had given Jun.

"So listen: for now, keep doing what you've been doing. Remain totally inconspicuous. And when the time comes—in about two or three days, I reckon—you'll do as we discussed, okay? You're going to climb up the Stardust Tower for me!"

Lhundup's eyes widened in horror. All tiredness left him once and for all. Suddenly, he felt as though he were still standing on David Mack's awful steel beam.

10.

The Genie From the Bottle

Topsid

The Morning After the Festival

The world ended in pain and uncertainty. Khatleen-Tarr gasped as the black silhouette kicked her in the gut. She fell to her knees and braced herself with her palm against the sewer's moist footpath. For a moment, she couldn't help retching.

Then came the blow. Something hard hit her in the neck from above and a flash of red-hot agony shot through her whole body. She screamed. Her elbow gave way, and her chin crashed down onto the path.

Then a light appeared in the blackness. Small, round, red. It didn't take a veteran to identify it as a weapon muzzle.

A beamer, she observed. *And whoever it is, they're aiming at me.*

Khatleen-Tarr switched off her brain and let her old army reflexes take the lead. She whipped around, her upper body colliding ungracefully with the rough stone wall, and groaned loudly. But the desperate maneuver achieved its goal: the shot missed her by a few centimeters. She had to seize this chance. She pushed off from the wall with all her strength, dove headlong toward the muzzle light, and rammed the unknown figure. Fetid ice-cold water surrounded her as they both plunged into the shallow canal.

This is no hatchling, she realized as she felt his body on her. *It's a full-grown man. A Topsidan.*

Had the despot's soldiers found them? Had Megh-Takarr followed them into the hatchlings' realm after all? Spluttering, she emerged. The stranger was underneath her, she knew that much.

But where was his weapon, dammit?

The figure struggled doggedly, trying to push her away, but she didn't let him. Again and again, she punched at the spot where she heard his spluttering head coming out of the water, using her other hand to feel around for his beamer.

The latter was her undoing. Their assailant suddenly reared up like a stubborn Rrakass. Khatleen-Tarr lost her balance, tipped off the man's rib cage, and only just stopped herself from landing head-first in the water again by pushing against the ground with both arms. That, she had no doubt, had been her death sentence.

She could already hear the stranger snarling with anger. He was behind her now; before she could spin around, two hands grabbed her waist, hard as a vice. They pulled and dragged, preventing her escape. Then he lifted her up! Her entire lower body lost contact with the ground and suddenly hung in mid-air, held by this mysterious, relentless opponent.

Khatleen-Tarr screamed again, struggled against his grasp, and kicked behind her with full force. She connected once, then a second time, but the man didn't let go. The opposite, in fact! Her kicks seemed to be oxygen fuelling his fiery rage. His hands gripped ever tighter. She thought she could hear her bones cracking and her organs bursting.

Then her fingertips met resistance in the water. Something solid lay there, directly to her right. Something...smooth?

The beamer! Oh, by the three moons, let it be the beamer.

It was. No sooner had she wrapped her fingers around its grip than she yanked it out of the cold wetness and fired blindly to her rear. Wherever Erikk-Mahnoli was, she hoped she wouldn't hit him by accident.

A bomb exploded on Gihl-Khuan's upper arm. At least, that was how it felt when the energy beam grazed him there. The pain momentarily robbed him of focus. He fell backward into the water,

and his prey escaped his grasp.

Fight back! barked the broken Positronic's voice in his mind, louder than any agony.

He reacted at once, bending his legs, tensing every muscle in them, and pushing them both forward in parallel. But the harlot was no longer in the location where his boot soles should have connected with her.

"Don't move!" growled a voice on the path to his right, and Gihl-Khuan knew that he had lost.

Damn, she's nimble! Once again, he threw a mental switch. "Shoot me if you must. But don't think you can force the genie that my allies and I let out tonight back into its bottle. No one's going to hold back our movement anymore!"

The small, round muzzle light aimed at his head didn't move a millimeter. But she didn't shoot either—not yet. That was good. She was considering his words.

"Would you grant a dying man one last wish?" he asked, strained. "Report to Megh-Takarr that this world belongs to the people, not him. And the people hate him so much that they will give their lives to overthrow him."

Somewhere farther back, something stirred. A strange voice groaned softly. *The Arkonide.*

"Erikk?" Khatleen-Tarr asked into the darkness. She sounded worried and slightly at a loss. "Are you okay?"

Silence. The beamer's bright muzzle trembled.

"Erikk?"

"Lower the weapon!" the Arkonide grunted, his shuffling steps approaching. "This guy's on our side. He's a cold-blood. You heard it yourself. Oh, my skull..."

Gihl-Khuan followed up on this immediately. "So...you're not

one of Megh-Takarr's soldiers?"

"Shut your mouth, all right?" the harlot hissed. He felt the weapon's muzzle at his temple and decided to follow her request.

"Come on!" the Arkonide urged. "It's just a misunderstanding. Don't make it worse." He groaned again. Judging by the sound that followed, he then sank to his knees.

"Are you injured?" Khatleen-Tarr was audibly nervous. "Where does it hurt, Erikk? What... What can I do?"

He didn't reply again, at least not with words. The agonized sounds spoke volumes, however.

Gihl-Khuan took a big gamble. "Sounds like he needs help. If you look in my jacket's right pocket, you'll find a wearable lamp. You can use that to examine him." He laughed tersely. "I'd get it out myself, but I suspect moving would spell my death."

For a moment, all was still. Then Khatleen-Tarr jumped back into the water where he was sitting motionless. When she spoke, her warm breath brushed his cheek. "You're damn right," she snarled, and he felt her free hand feeling about on his side, searching for the lamp in his pocket. The touch had something pleasant about it, he was stunned to realize.

Not three seconds later, the palm-sized device cut a swathe of light into the darkness, and Gihl-Khuan squinted. It took a moment before his eyes had adjusted to the change and he could take a proper look at his two opponents.

The sight they presented was among the saddest he had ever seen. Khatleen-Tarr's clothes, held together in a makeshift manner, were little more than rags on a surprisingly attractive body, and she was clutching the beamer—still aimed at the hunter—as tightly as if she had fallen into quicksludge in a swamp cave and the weapon was the lifeline pulling her to safety. In her gaze, skepticism competed with desperation. Gihl-Khuan was shocked by how touching he found the sight of this pretty being.

Eric, the Arkonide, looked even more pathetic. He was lying on the narrow footpath that ran alongside the canal, holding his pale head in both hands. Instead of clothing, he was wearing the remnants of the Rrakass costume in which Gihl-Khuan had first spotted him, the fur swinging around his waist. His upper body was as bare as his feet and as ugly as the night.

That's the strangest Arkonide I've ever come across, marveled the defective Positronic.

Gihl-Khuan agreed. Then he slipped back into his role and turned his attention to the fugitive courtesan. "Go on, then; treat him! I don't mean you any harm, I swear. Your companion's right. If you're opposed to Megh-Takarr, then you and I are on the same side."

Khatleen-Tarr's skepticism remained. "What are you doing down here? Since when does the extra-governmental opposition creep around in the stinking sewer tunnels?"

He laughed humorlessly, a little desperate now himself. "If you really must know, I'm not creeping, I'm fleeing. Like you two, I'm guessing. I was at the festival, waiting for the signal from my cell leader, and..." Then he stopped and took a deep breath. He needed a moment to think, and to his luck, that fit excellently with the character he was trying to play.

In a few, entirely spontaneous words, he told the woman holding Charr-Kobahl's gun a story. It starred a slightly naive but enthusiastic cold-blood called Gihl-Khuan, who had become a terrorist when his neighbor had convinced him to take part in the Festival of the Three Moons uprising. But when the explosions began, walls started to collapse around him, and he had seen angry, armed-to-the-teeth soldiers charging at him, this fictional version of Gihl-Khuan had gotten scared. Through luck more than skill, he had managed to overpower one of his assailants. With the soldier's weapon in his hand, he had taken the quickest route he could find to escape the danger zone: through a sewer duct.

"To be honest, I was more afraid of running into hatchlings down here than Megh-Takarr's soldiers," he concluded, lifting his

tail to indicate helplessness. “But then you two came along. My overstimulated mind got the wrong impression. I’m sorry.”

The Arkonide groaned. Khatleen-Tarr silently looked at Gihl-Khuan one last time, then let her weapon sink and devoted herself to her injured companion.

Well done, boy, praised the broken Positronic.

The small lamp’s cone was an island in a sea of darkness. Khatleen-Tarr, her Arkonide, and Gihl-Khuan sat in a circle around its edge and discussed what to do next. Beside them, the flow of waste water stoically rushed towards its destination, vermin scurried along the footpath, and freezing liquid dripped from the low ceiling. It was cold down here, cold and unpleasant, but the hunter didn’t care about such trivial details. His prey was sitting right in front of him. What else mattered?

“Are you okay now?” Khatleen-Tarr asked the Arkonide, looking at him.

The man nodded. “Hey, with competent treatment like that, how can I *not* get straight back on my feet?”

It was a highly forced compliment. True, the beautiful Khatleen-Tarr had proved herself talented enough when dealing with his head injury, but she had managed most of the necessary steps—cleaning the wound with condensation water, crafting and applying a compression bandage—only thanks to oral instructions from the Arkonide. He must be a healer back on his own world, Gihl-Khuan presumed.

Not for the first time, the hunter wondered why Megh-Takarr was so interested in this man. Among affluent Topsidans, it wasn’t unusual to keep an Arkonide as a status symbol, but did it absolutely have to be this one? Why didn’t the despot just take the next best option? Why all this effort? Purely to assuage his wounded vanity?

“Well, it was nowhere near as bad as it looked,” the deserter

argued. Gihl-Khuan found it astoundingly tough to pull his gaze away from her. How odd.

Erikk-Mahnoli, as he had introduced himself, seemed friendly...and quite out of breath. He was still pale as chalk and leaning against the stone wall, but he was regaining his strength. The almost thirty minutes that they had now sat together had made this clear enough to the hunter. It wouldn't be much longer before his prey could go back on the run.

So it thought, at least.

In reality, only one of you is leaving the sewers alive. Megh-Takarr had ordered that the Arkonide be brought back alive, not the whore, no matter how pretty she may be. And the subcontroller's beam weapon was resting on her right leg. All the hunter had to do was reach out for it and...

"Where has that miserable flapping creature gone, anyway?" asked Khatleen-Tarr, interrupting his fantasy. "Since our rebel here emerged from the darkness, I haven't heard a sound from it."

The Arkonide exhaled. "I'm wondering that myself. Hopefully your beam shot didn't hit her." He shook his head. "Hey, she's probably scouting out our quickest and safest route to the surface or something. She'll be back soon enough."

Flapping creature? Gihl-Khuan was thrown. "Wait a moment. Are you saying there are three of you down here?" He had never seen a third person either in the network images or here in the sewers.

"Not if it were up to me," Khatleen-Tarr murmured derisively.

As if waiting for the magic word, a small flying lizard swooped out of the darkness at that very moment. It was about a forearm's length, emerald green in color, and it landed with almost aristocratic presumptiveness on the Arkonide's shoulder.

"You call, she answers," the healer murmured, grinning as he ran a soft finger over the animal's little head. "Well, Kikerren? No

hatchlings anywhere, near or far?" Then he looked at Gihl-Khuan and widened his eyes. "Oh, sorry, but...are you all right? You suddenly look like you've seen a ghost."

Gihl-Khuan opened his mouth, but sheer surprise kept him from forming any more words.

Kikerren really did appear to have found a safe route through the sewers. At least, they didn't encounter any further danger, and that was good for Manoli's nerves. Even Khatleen-Tarr had visibly relaxed, he felt—though she would doubtless never admit that it was down to their little "pet" returning.

"And then we ran for it," Manoli said, finishing up his explanation. He looked at Gihl-Khuan, who was walking alongside him. "And not a moment too soon. The Purple Nest was absolute chaos. We were lucky to get out halfway unscathed."

The Topsidan man in filthy three-moon clothing nodded at Kikerren, who was flying ahead of them. He, too, spoke in a pointedly hushed tone; clearly, discretion was the better part of valor even on alien worlds like this. "And since then, you've been following this animal? What did you call it—Kikirrn?"

"Kikerren," Manoli corrected. "Believe it or not, Bismall-Kehn gave her to us personally. As a guide." *And who knows if she's really "just" an animal?*

Gihl-Khuan was about to reply when the flying lizard whizzed past them. Again, she seemed to have heard her name and sensed it was the moment for a special display. She flew a few circles around the Topsidan's head and even included a little loop-the-loop, clearly enjoying the man's astounded gaze.

Clever little thing, Manoli thought with amusement, wondering again what significance this peculiar flying lizard might have.

Then he felt Khatleen-Tarr's hand on his shoulder and turned around. The young woman brought up the rear of their strange procession through Kerh-Onf's underworld, and judging by her

expression, which Manoli could make out fairly well thanks to Gihl-Khuan's lamp, she was anything but happy. "Irate" was more accurate.

"What exactly do you think you're doing?" she hissed, not taking her eyes off Gihl-Khuan for a moment. The Topsidan man was too captivated by Kikerren to hear her, and Khatleen-Tarr clearly wanted to ensure it stayed that way. "Tell him a little more and he'll know our entire escape plan. All because you have to run your mouth. Erikk, we don't even know Gihl-Khuan! Maybe he really is who he says he is, but are you prepared to take that risk and trust him just because he says so?" She huffed softly. "You might as well give him back his army beamer and stand right in front of him to make sure he doesn't miss when he pulls the trigger."

Manoli threw a look over his shoulder. The Topsidan man was a few meters ahead of them by now and still oddly fascinated with the flying lizard. "You think I'm totally nuts, don't you?" he whispered. "Do you really think I'd be that dumb?" He smirked.

Khatleen-Tarr looked at him, confused. Manoli was just about to explain when Gihl-Khuan's voice behind him.

"What's keeping you two? Are we too fast for you?"

Manoli didn't have to be a Topsidan to recognize a warning look from a woman for what it was. He mouthed a "trust me"—which she presumably didn't understand, as his mouth was forming English words—and turned to face Gihl-Khuan.

"A little yes, I'm afraid I'm still a bit shaky on my feet."

As soon as they had caught up, Manoli continued his story. "Anyway, we were right in the middle of Khir-Teyal. Do you know the area?"

Gihl-Khual grunted, which Manoli took to mean "more or less."

"And there was a civil war happening all around us. I mean, big explosions were shaking the ground and black smoke clouds were rising up among the distant buildings. More than once, I wished I

could just teleport to the Groogwain plain with the power of my mind. To be out of the cramped city. I'm not great with crowds, you see."

The man nodded as if he could understand that.

Well, it's the truth... Manoli decided to keep going in that direction. "Back home, on...on Arkon, I lived out in the country. I like making things with my own two hands. In the good old-fashioned way."

Another nod. Gihl-Khuan's was staring into the middle distance. Where Manoli came from, people said, "A penny for your thoughts." Right now, he wished he had one.

Time dragged on. Manoli's inner clock had long since lost track, so he couldn't judge how long they had spent marching through the darkness. But they kept walking, unhindered by any hatchlings, and that was all that mattered. The view changed little. Some passageways were wider, some as narrow as the one where they had encountered Gihl-Khuan. Sometimes the path led down slick stone steps; sometimes the three unexpected cohorts had to climb over low iron fences or poorly plastered walls with moss growing on them.

Wherever they went, it stank wretchedly, the air heavy with the odor of feces and chemicals. The rushing sewage stream was their constant companion. All in all, Kerh-Onf's sewer system wasn't much different from his image of one from any metropolis on Earth, although given the local population density—Topsid's population numbered between forty and fifty million inhabitants—it looked to have been designed in a very space-efficient albeit labyrinthine way.

Khatleen-Tarr stayed silent most of the time, which he didn't object to at all. It made his plan easier. Manoli had never been a big fan of small talk, but now he jabbered on as if his life depended on it. He told Gihl-Khuan about the barn and the fur from a container, about Ragh-Tukurr and his drunken henchmen, and with every detail he shared, the Topsidan man grew more responsive.

Gihl-Khuan didn't talk much and revealed almost nothing about himself, but he responded nonetheless. Sometimes with gestures, sometimes with his facial expression, sometimes with a grunt or snort. The longer Manoli bent his ear, the more complete a profile he formed in Gihl-Khuan's mind. That was his intention. Sometimes —and this was *definitely* one of those times—people said more by saying less.

Manoli took a deep breath. His many weeks in Bismall-Kehn's pleasure house had served a purpose after all: he had picked up a lot about Topsidans'...wait, could you even call it "human nature" when you were talking about people who weren't human?

Well, whatever it's called, I learned about it. He looked at Gihl-Khuan. *And that's why I'm confident this guy is lying to us.*

Nevertheless, the stranger continued to puzzle him, especially his obvious fascination with Kikerren. Again and again, the lizard man's gaze wandered over to Bismall-Kehn's eccentric pet.

They came to a distribution point in the subterranean sewer system, a square yet cavelike room about eight meters tall. Several tubes the width of a person ran down the walls; they were leaking in places, with hot steam rising out of them every so often. Then it always hissed, and this hissing echoed spectrally in the room. Manoli felt like a medieval knight who had dared to enter a dragon's cave. But wherever he looked, he saw no sign of treasure or a damsel in distress.

The canal that had led them there ended at this juncture. To keep going, they would essentially have to change floors. Carefully, they descended one rung of the rusted stepladder after another to reach the lower level. There, they looked around, at a loss.

"Right or left?" Khatleen-Tarr asked quietly.

Revealed by the light of her small lamp, the path forked at the far wall. Two new tunnels emerged out of the one that had brought them there, leading out of the large room at an angle of maybe fifty degrees to one another. To Manoli's chagrin, each of them was blocked by an iron grate that hung from the ceiling and reached

almost to the water's surface. Whichever path they chose, it would mean leaving the relatively dry footpath and plunging into the stinking, frigid waste water again.

The flying lizard circled in the air as if herself unsure of which route to take.

"She likes you, doesn't she?" Manoli asked.

Gihl-Khuan darted his tongue in and out in a lizardlike fashion, visibly flummoxed for a moment. Then the corners of his mouth twitched. "This creature...Kikerren...she's so impressive. A flying lizard as a guide..." It sounded admiring and amused at once.

"I assume you're quite familiar with her species?" Manoli immediately asked. *And will happily tell me how?*

"Oh yes," replied the supposed rebel. It sounded full of longing, as if he was thinking of an old friend. Then he blinked again and Manoli could see him slipping back into the role he was playing for them. "To some degree, I mean," the Topsidan continued with markedly less emotion. "There are so many different species of animal, after all..."

Manoli saw his chance and took it. "And if Kikerren's not an animal at all—not in the conventional sense? If she doesn't act and think the way we expect from beings we associate with that word and its connotations?"

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Khatleen-Tarr's look of "have you gone totally insane?" But he knew what he was doing. His goal felt closer than ever before.

"Not an animal?" Gihl-Khuan stopped short, stunned. The role vanished and the real man returned, at least for a moment. "What do you mean?"

Manoli felt vindicated in his efforts. *This isn't small talk anymore. For you, it's...* Something personal? Was he really reading Gihl-Khuan's expression correctly? Kikerren didn't just amuse and fascinate him; she *moved* him.

“Believe it or not,” Manoli added, sensing Khatleen-Tarr’s dismayed look behind him, “Kikerren isn’t only leading us safely through the sewers. She also knows the way to Sharp-Eyes. He’s our real destination.”

Gihl-Khuan came to a halt and stared at him, stunned. This was it. The decisive moment had arrived. Manoli held his breath and watched Khatleen-Tarr’s eyes grow larger than ever before. She clearly had an urge to beat him to a pulp then and there, and he could hardly blame her.

Wait! he thought. *Trust me! Trust Kikerren.*

Gihl-Khuan breathed out deeply. Then he shook his scaly head and reached out his hand. Manoli took it.

“I believe it,” the Topsidan murmured, and there wasn’t a hint of acting in his demeanor anymore. “By the moons, I believe it. And I think fate has brought us together, Erikk-Mahnoli and Khatleen-Tarr.”

Manoli gaped. He hadn’t addressed her by name so far. And that didn’t appear to have escaped the young lizard woman’s notice either.

Suddenly, Kikerren hissed softly. Once she was certain she had her three companions’ attention, she swung into the left tunnel opening—as purposefully as if her earlier indecision had been just for show. As if she understood Gihl-Khuan.

“Follow her!” said the Topsidan man with conviction, jumping dauntlessly into the water.

11.

Nightmare Images

Kikerren...

Gihl-Khuan could hardly pull his gaze away from the small creature. Despite the chill of the narrow sewer tunnels, he suddenly felt hot. His mind—usually so clear, so unequivocal—was now an utter muddle, all because of an inexplicably fascinating whore and a winged animal. It was baffling.

You're mistaken, resounded the Positronic's voice in his head, calm and firm. It had always been his grounding, his rock. *You have to be. Be sensible. Be the hunter. Focus on your mission, not on these flights of fancy.*

From a logical point of view, he could only agree. But although he knew that, saw that, he couldn't make himself ignore Kikerren. Or more precisely, what she represented.

You're endangering your mission, said the armband. The reproach in the statement was unmistakable, but the tone remained matter-of-fact. Gihl-Khuan had never known the now-broken Positronic to be anything but flat and emotionless. That had been one of its many advantages. *Your prey is directly in front of you. All you need to do is take it. With every moment you don't act, you put Megh-Takarr's prize at risk. Is that what you want?*

Of course not. The very thought pained him. Megh-Takar had always been good to his loyal hunters. Gihl-Khuan owed the despot his life; he had never disappointed the man and never would. He would rather die.

And yet here you are, traipsing through hatchling territory, the broken Positronic argued, *and dreaming of Buntayn. Why? A sudden fit of nostalgia?*

No. Because of her.

A flying lizard? Boy, you're arguing in circles. This animal isn't what you think it is. Because it can't be.

Gihl-Khuan nodded. Buntayn didn't exist anymore. On the day the Arkonide fleet had destroyed the world—his true world—there had been no survivors. None but him.

Yet Kikerren was gliding through the stifling sewer air like a living, breathing "but."

Gihl-Khuan swallowed. He thought of Megh-Takarr, and in his mind's eye, the past came to life.

The starship's command center is bigger than the wandering wood and brighter than the sun. At least, it looks that way when the lift door opens and Gihl-Khuan sees it for the first time. He feels the officer's hand on his back; it pushes him forward, gently yet firmly. Gihl-Khuan dares to take the step.

Only when he's standing in the middle of the command center does he look upward—and instead of the familiar sight of the sky, he sees silvery metal and blinking lights.

"Stay calm," says the officer as an urge rises in Gihl-Khuan to run away in panic, back into the open air. The man holds him tight, but Gihl-Khuan can't just stand still! All this here...it's wrong! It's cramped! It...

"I know," says the man as if he can read Gihl-Khuan's mind. His voice is full of warmth. Unlike the Positronic. "I understand. But you have nothing to fear, believe me. And you can't go back. No one can."

With those last words, his tone grows deeper, and Gihl-Khuan realizes that it sounds that way when someone says something sad. Only then does he understand what he's saying. He stares at the officer and barely notices his knees giving way. If not for the man's supportive hands, Gihl-Khuan would fall to the ground.

No one can.

Three words, but they changed everything.

Again, panic wells up in Gihl-Khuan, and again, the man is there to soften it. “I’m sorry,” he says, and Gihl-Khuan believes him. “We’re all so, so sorry.”

He starts explaining again. The story about the Arkonide fleet and the lucky coincidence that led to him being the lone survivor of the Graan-Tohl. *Gihl-Khuan has already heard it many times since waking up, but he still struggles to believe it. The last thing he remembers is falling off the rock in the fishing creek while searching for insects. Then everything went black, and when he came to again, he wasn’t on his world anymore.*

Gihl-Khuan looks at the man who saved him from the Arkonides and shakes his head. “I understand,” he says quietly. He sees in the man’s gaze that the resignation in his words must seem even bigger than the wandering wood and the bridge.

“Do you want to see it again?” the man asks.

Gihl-Khuan hesitates. See it again? But he was just told they couldn’t go back again. Because an Arkonide fleet was inbound and wanted to destroy it.

“As a hologram,” the man explains patiently. “I can show you all of Buntayn as a three-dimensional recording, the view of your world from space. Do you want that?”

Gihl-Khuan nods silently. A farewell, he thinks, recalling the lessons his data armband’s Positronic has taught him on the subject.

Then Buntayn is there, a breathtakingly beautiful sphere of blue, green, and white. It floats in the middle of the room, easily as wide as a river rock in the fishing creek behind the cave. Gihl-Khuan knows what a hologram is, but he can’t help reaching out to touch the world—only for his hand to glide right through it.

You can’t hold on to the ephemeral, he thinks, remembering one of the Positronic’s sayings.

He feels the man’s hand once more. It’s touching him on the shoulder. The sensation gives him strength.

“We have to set out,” the man murmurs from behind him, softly and with regret in his voice.

Gihl-Khuan looks at his world. Here is here. Now is now. Those words from the eleven clauses of the Social Directive are the bedrock of Topsidian culture, the Positronic has told him.

Gihl-Khuan knows that to be a true Topsidan, he has to keep to the eleven clauses. Even when he hurts. So he nods.

“Start the propulsion units!” orders the man, and the ground beneath Gihl-Khuan’s feet immediately starts to vibrate. “Set a course for Topsid. We’re flying home.”

The ship’s Positronic acknowledges the order. The holo disappears. And for the first time in more years than he can count, Gihl-Khuan feels truly alone.

The hatchling's corpse was lying in the middle of the footpath. Its scaly chest was open, the albino-white flesh already half-decayed. Whole hosts of rodents appeared to feast well whenever they passed this point of the sewers. Gihl-Khuan hardly even looked at it, crossing the dead body in one large stride.

"So, these are hatchlings," the Arkonide murmured softly by his side. He'd turned even paler. The sight of the dead being seemed to have taken some of the wind out of his sails.

"*Were* hatchlings," said Khatleen-Tarr. She formed the vanguard of their group, excepting the flying lizard. She pointed the cone of lamplight toward the path ahead, which led into another large room. The floor of this distribution point was saturated with hatchling corpses. The thin but muscular bodies were paler even than a full-grown Arkonide. Gihl-Khuan knew the strength of these beings—knew how unable they were to stop themselves once they flew into a rage. It was no coincidence that Megh-Takarr had secretly recruited a large proportion of his bodyguards from their ranks. That was one of the reasons Sendschai-Karth tolerated the rearing station escapees here at all.

Eric Manoli clasped the barrel of the beam weapon he held even tighter and stepped over to Khatleen-Tarr. Together, they stared at the field of corpses. For a moment, no one said a word. Even Kikerren froze in place mid-flight.

"Like an elephant graveyard," the Arkonide whispered at last. "And we really have to go through here?"

Kikerren hissed. That clearly meant yes.

The room at whose slick threshold they stood measured maybe ten meters across and was markedly more industrial than the previous ones. In brick enclosures that dominated the corners right and left of the traveling companions, large generators hummed and whirred, and through the tightly meshed iron grating that formed about a third of the floor, Gihl-Khuan could now see three hissing and steaming servo pumps working stoically and steadily. Hot

steam rose up through the grating, pushing its way through the corpses and spreading out into the room like Topsid's famous Topsidian permanent fog. The air smelled of oil, feces, and salt. The last of those was, he suspected, due to the hatchlings' dried blood caking the walls.

"This must be one of their battlegrounds," murmured the deserter.

There was something in her gaze. Was it pain? Gihl-Khuan was sure he recognized the expression. She, too, seemed to be more afraid than she let her face reveal.

"Do you see the wounds, Erikk? I told you how violent these beasts can be..."

They're not the only ones, Gihl-Khuan thought. Again, he felt a memory drawing closer. What was wrong with him? He'd never been so overcome with nostalgia.

You're standing next to an Arkonide and thinking about violence, the broken Positronic knew. *It's no wonder that leads to you making associations. The real question is how you plan to deal with it.*

He swallowed. Normally, he'd shake off such memories like dust. Normally, he stood above his past. Normally, he focused on what he was doing, on the goal, not the path already trodden. He didn't let himself get distracted by charming scales and eyes hinting at a familiar pain. But however he bristled against it internally, this was far beyond normal and had been for some time.

The distribution room's rear wall boasted a pitch-black opening —the entrance to the next sewer canal. Khatleen-Tarr nodded toward it. "Let's keep going," she whispered. "And not another word, understood? Whatever happened here, it wasn't very long ago. If anyone survived this carnage, they might still be hanging around nearby."

Kikerren, who had landed on her shoulder, made a brief hiss before flapping away again. Eric Manoli took a deep breath. And Gihl-Khuan started moving.

“Why?” Gihl-Khuan asks, looking at the man. They’re standing in a luxurious room. The earth-toned walls and upscale furniture speak of wealth, while the guards outside in the corridor indicate power. Through the windows, the day is drawing to a close, bathing the sky above Kerh-Onf in reddish orange.

The man—Megh-Takarr; he’ll have to get used to calling him by name if he’s going to work for him—stands up from his stone stool, smooths his expensive robe, and steps over to Gihl-Khuan.

“Why?” Megh-Takarr repeats quietly, disparagingly. “It was Arkonides. What else is there to explain? Call up the data and learn more about their people. Then you’ll understand that there are beings in space for whom arrogance and lust for power are the only motives necessary.”

But a whole world? *Gihl-Khuan shakes his head. However he turns it over in his mind, he just can’t make sense of it.*

“You don’t feel at home here, my friend,” says Megh-Takarr with a look that was half friendly, half pitying. “Six months is nowhere near enough to get used to a whole new life. That’s only natural. Subconsciously, you still balk at the change you’ve been through, which is why your subconscious is looking for ways to undo it. Because to it—and thus also to you, deep down inside—that feels easier than the alternative, which is accepting the unalterable. But it is *unalterable, Gihl-Khuan, however much that hurts. Buntayn, the world you long for, doesn’t exist anymore. I found you and saved you at literally the last second. There’s no going back.”*

Gihl-Khuan looks outside. The last rays of sunlight are falling across the roofs of the old buildings and enormous towers. From up here, he thinks he can even make out the plain beyond the city limits, but maybe that’s an illusion, since the city—it seems to him whenever he wanders its streets—has no end. He thinks of Buntayn, as he so often does. Of the day Megh-Takarr entered his life.

Sometimes—late at night, when the longing once more grows greater than reason and he tries to numb himself with cheap hooch in cheap

taverns despite knowing it never fully works—it feels like his memory of that day is no more than a figment of his imagination, another muddled alcohol trip. The command center with its glaring lights, the three-dimensional image of the planet... On the worst of the bad nights, they feel almost like scenes out of a dream, not memories of real events. Did that really all happen, or...

He shakes his head. It's time to leave the bad nights behind him, and he knows that. Time for a new beginning, a clean break. What good are unachievable longings? Lies flatter. The truth hurts. *That's what the Positronic taught him.* Seek out the pain and win the sweet fruit of insight!

I've dishonored you more than enough, old friend, *he thinks, looking at the band on his wrist. The Positronic hasn't worked for a long time now, but just as he doesn't want to leave Buntayn behind, he's kept hold of the armband anyway. So far.*

Seek out the pain.

Gihl-Khuan pulls himself away from the view of Sendschai-Karth and looks at his host. "This assignment you mentioned," he begins. "What would it involve?"

Megh-Takarr's smile is filled with kindness.

Nothing and no one had survived Buntayn's destruction. Only him, the man from the wreckage of the *Graan-Tohl*. That was how it had gone. So Megh-Takarr had informed him, so said the data banks, so stood the facts. A Topsidian ship had crashed on an uninhabited world, and a single survivor, barely grown beyond hatchling age, had survived alone in the wilderness. Then, a fleet officer from his distant home planet had found and rescued him—just before the Arkonides came.

It was the story of his life, and Gihl-Khuan knew it well. He knew it from his memories, from the long conversations with Megh-Takarr, and from studying the flight plans and Topsid's historical documents.

So why was he suddenly doubting it? And why did his gaze kept getting drawn to Megh-Takarr's beautiful deserter?

You said it yourself, the broken Positronic's voice patiently reminded him. *There are countless animal species. Kikerren's might be related to Buntayn's flying lizards, nothing more.*

He nodded. That was entirely plausible, and he knew it. Nevertheless, he found it hard to believe, because the similarity was uncanny. Gihl-Khuan was walking silently through the stifling sewer next to the Arkonide and behind Khatleen-Tarr, but in his mind, he was once more sitting on the rocks by the creek, fishing in Buntayn's sunlight and laughing at the flying lizards as they mischievously played above the water. The area around the river was filled with them every day. He would never forget them—and would recognize one anywhere.

There can only be one explanation, he thought. *A few Gennsflesch lizards survived Buntayn's destruction as well. They came to Kerh-Onf, just like me. And they've been reproducing here.*

His gaze glided over Kikerren's scaled skin, her leathery wings... It was unequivocal. This *was* the same species. One that had, to his knowledge, only existed on the world of the wandering wood. One that had died along with it. Supposedly.

A Gennsflesch lizard. He swallowed. He hadn't seen one for years. On Buntayn, these creatures had been almost like his friends, but they had died with Buntayn. Or so the despot had said.

So what? said the defective Positronic. *There's still only one of them here. What difference does it make?*

Potentially a big one, he argued in his thoughts, balling his hands into fists. *A decisive one, even. The one between lies and the truth.*

How long had it been since he had last doubted Megh-Takarr's story of Buntayn's end? How much time had passed since he had questioned his own memories? Had the clean break he'd made in Sendschai-Karth back then actually been the wrong one, perhaps? A part of him had always questioned it, but he'd learned to ignore

that part. He'd *needed* to, since a hunter couldn't linger on the past. During the hunt, there was always only the here and now.

You're getting lost in a fantasy, remarked the imaginary voice of his armband. *Could it be that you're looking for reasons to doubt Megh-Takarr's sincerity?*

No. That was nonsense. The despot had always been good to him, and the flying lizard was just a flying lizard. Why would he doubt Megh-Takarr?

The broken Positronic didn't let up. *Perhaps because of the pretty deserter. Admit it—you like her. She stirs something in you. And that confuses you.*

He was about to object out loud when he realized how strange that would have looked to the others. And could he even object, really? If he was honest to himself, the Positronic wasn't wrong. Khatleen-Tarr was pretty, yes, but...

But also injured, it occurred to him. *Homeless. Lonely. Damaged like me.*

Could the enemy of a friend be a friend?

Alarmed by his own thoughts, Gihl-Khuan quickly looked to the side at the Arkonide's pale face. Eric Manoli stayed silent, as the attractive woman from Bismall-Kehn's nest had advised him, but he looked exceptionally nervous.

Gihl-Khuan remembered his words. *Kikerren isn't only leading us safely through the sewers. She also knows the way to Sharp-Eyes. He's our real destination.*

Sharp-Eyes.

Naturally, Gihl-Khuan knew that name. No one who roamed the metropolis's many districts and dark corners could avoid hearing it —the oh-so-fascinating leader of the opposition movement. But Sharp-Eyes didn't exist. He was a myth, no more than a legend the dissidents talked about behind closed doors to give their actions a center, their motivations a core.

On the other hand, before he had meant the attractive deserter and her entourage, he had also believed that no other survivors of Buntayn existed but him.

What if this descendant of a Gennsflesch lizard is right? he wondered, looking helplessly at the Positronic. All of a sudden, he felt just as lost as on the day his ship had crash landed. *What if Sharp-Eyes really does exist and this creature knows the way to him?*

He'd told Eric Manoli and Khatleen-Tarr that fate had brought them together. That hadn't been a lie, but rather honest conviction. Yet he had promised Megh-Takarr the hunt, the prey, with the same conviction.

"What do I do?" he whispered quietly. "Help me. I don't know who to believe anymore."

A moment later, the tiny display on his armband, *the display that had been inactive for years*, sprang to life! Wave-shaped lines appeared on the square monitor panel, and a tinny voice sounded.

"Don't disobey your orders, hunter!" it rebuked him, the farthest thing from flat and emotionless now. "Keep your promise!"

In sheer surprise, Gihl-Khuan came to a stop. With stunned horror, he stared at the display.

Then a shadow jumped out of the darkness and grabbed him.

12.

Ad Astra. Kind of.

Terrania

January 21, 2037

The key stick trembled in unison with the hand guiding it. Only on his third attempt did Lhundup successfully insert it into the port on the console. With a loud whirr, a jolt that shook him right to his core, and a roaring sound like three dragons at once, the elevator cabin finally came to life.

“If Ai Guo heard that…” he murmured with a grimace. The noise was unbelievable! It could wake the dead, let alone the living.

In his mind’s eye, the young Tibetan could picture the foreman jolting awake and then standing in the doorway to the break and elevator room, his face the same as Lhundup had often imagined in the past few hours: filled with disbelief and boundless disappointment. He knew that he was betraying the only friend he had down here, but he couldn’t do anything else. He daren’t. This was what Bai Jun wanted. All of Terrania might depend on it.

“Does it really have to happen *like this?*” Lhundup heard himself asking in his memories.

Five hours had passed since his last conversation with Jun, and he still heard the mayor’s answer just as clearly as the first time: “Your loyalty is to Terrania, my friend. Your mission was never about digging up rocks and dirt, but about finding answers. So we both have to do what we must.”

The words coming out of the pod had been softly spoken and uncommonly full of sympathy. With the goal theoretically in sight, Bai Jun had seemed more relaxed again, more calm. And yet, now that the key moment had arrived and the cramped elevator was making its way upwards, Lhundup felt like the worst traitor the

Earth had ever known. He kept his eyes on the doorway until the cabin went high enough that only rock and earth surrounded him. Ai Guo did not appear.

He's asleep, Lhundup told himself. *He didn't notice when you stole the key, and he didn't notice the elevator starting up either. None of them did.*

He pursed his lips and hoped it was true. If there was one person he didn't want to know about this, it was Ai Guo.

The plan was as simple as it was intimidating. Lhundup would—under the cloak of night—travel up to the surface and gain access to the Stardust Tower using a code Jun had given him. When he reached ground level, his path would then lead him past the empty offices to the anti-grav shaft, then up to the fiftieth floor and Homer G. Adams's office door. From what Jun had promised, this would open for him as well thanks to a second code. The rest of the work, the actual research in Adams's computer data banks that were secured against access from outside the office, would then be handled via special instructions given in real time on a call with the mayor.

That was all well and good in theory. But who was Lhundup kidding? In practice, it would go nothing like that. At least, so he feared as he was carried through the ground below the Gobi with a queasy feeling in his stomach and his heart beating out of his chest. Because in practice, Bai Jun's secret agent was no 007. He was, at best, a moderately skilled former herdsman who couldn't operate an electronic pickaxe without the risk of hacking into his own leg.

"Can't you go yourself, Jun?" Lhundup had asked, almost pleading with the ex-Chinese ex-general. "If you know the codes and came up with the plan, why don't you do it?"

Bai Jun had sighed. "I'm this city's mayor. Its safety is my responsibility. As much as I regret it, Adams's odd behavior in the recent past awakens the former secret agent in me. I've made the administrator aware, directly and indirectly, that I don't trust him. I demanded answers without receiving any. But Adams is clever. I can't keep on pestering him, not personally, without blowback. He

is no idiot; if he has a skeleton in the closet, as I assume, he'll have been keeping me in his sights for a while now. If I go about it directly and get caught, I'll be in hot water—and that can't happen, for Terrania's sake. Not as long as Adams's machinations aren't public. And I fear only we two can make them public, Lhundup. You and I, you on the ground and me from the shadows. For Terrania."

For Terrania. Two little words, but a tremendous comfort to Lhundup at this moment in the dark elevator. Was he doing the right thing? Of course he was. If Jun said it was for the good of Terrania, how could it be wrong?

Suddenly, it grew lighter. The cabin was approaching the Earth's surface. Lhundup moaned softly as fresh air suddenly streamed into his nose. He had completely forgotten how good it smelled, how wonderfully clear and healthy. What had possessed him to give up this blessing and live in Ai Guo's dusty darkness?

With another jolt, which made the young Tibetan recoil in shock, the elevator came to a halt. Even as the door opened, he started looking around. Did he really have no unwanted observers to fear?

To his great relief, Jun seemed to have once again hit the bull's-eye with his assessment. "We'll use the time window between two and two fifteen in the morning," the mayor had told him. "That's when they have a shift change in the upper station. From the information I've obtained, it's mostly empty at that time. We won't find a more perfect moment."

Lhundup relaxed a little. He'd checked every one of Jun's assertions with Ai Guo, a little clumsily perhaps, but covertly enough, and he'd confirmed every one of them. Even so, Lhundup was astonished to find himself in an empty area of the great Stardust building project. The elevator ride had ended inside a shed-like temporary building of maybe thirty square meters made of corrugated metal, aluminum, and dark tarpaulin. Except for the station supervisor's tiny office, it was a single room filling the entire rectangular box. Its right-hand wall was dominated by a wide sliding door that would, if fully opened, easily fit an entire pyramid of yaks inside it, per Lhundups' non-expert estimate. The left wall

was covered in shelves full of technical equipment, some of it of Arkonide origin, some Ferron. Wall number three continued the shelves, supplemented by the visual distraction of the office. Wall number four...

Lhundup's breath caught in his throat. Someone was standing there! Pale moonlight shone through a hole in the tarpaulin that covered the hall instead of a real roof, illuminating a bulky shape. One holding a firearm!

Lhundup took less than a second to recognize the man: Rogen. The Scandinavian was wearing plain overalls. His face was in shadow, only his hair almost glowing in the moonlight. He was holding a kind of weapon in his hands—and at that very moment, its barrel sank to point in Lhundup's direction!

"I... I can explain," the young Tibetan wheezed, raising his trembling hands. His voice had suddenly gone even weaker than his knees. "I swear, Rogen, it's not what it looks like. If you just—"

The barrel was now aimed directly at him. Rogen lifted his head a little, sighed loudly, and...the barrel sank again, until it touched the ground with its tip. Only now did Lhundup realize that the Scandinavian was *sleeping*.

Incredible. Standing up?

Lhundup's heartbeat returned to normal only gradually. The former herdsman didn't know what fascinated him more: the fact that, contrary to expectations, he was still alive, or that this colossus of an engineer could sleep on his feet—especially amid the noise the elevator had made. Rogen, he now saw, was leaning against the fourth shed wall, his head turned toward Lhundup. The weapon appeared to mark him as a night watchman. That explained a few things—except why this night watchman was sleeping on the job.

I'd love to do that too if I could. Lhundup was struggling to keep his eyes open. The days of drudgery had taken their toll, and anyone who wasn't leading a double life as a secret agent was no doubt enjoying the recovery from their intense hardship. Labache,

Coletti, even Zhuo Hui—by now they were undoubtedly warm in their beds. Only James Bond wasn't allowed to do that. Lhundup felt lousier than ever before. Why had he ever agreed to this insanity?

All that said...would he really have been able to sleep anyway? *A bad conscience makes a poor pillow,* Uncle Dalaimoc had always said. *How true, how true.*

Quietly and cautiously, he stepped out of the elevator cabin. He had barely left it when the door closed again with a loud slam. Lhundup almost died. He looked desperately from the elevator to Rogen and back again, seeking somewhere to hide. But his worries were unnecessary. The noise echoed away without the engineer's head even twitching. His chest rose and fell in the rhythm of his shallow, even breaths. He snored lightly and with satisfaction.

Jun's plan included sending the elevator straight back down again—"The less we diverge from the normal routine, the lower the risk of discovery"—but Lhundup didn't want to push his luck with Rogen and decided against it in the moment.

"I was never here, okay?" he mouthed in the snoring man's direction once he'd reached the sliding door. Then he opened it a crack, squeezed through it, and finally stood outdoors for the first time in days.

It was deathly quiet in the center of Terrania. Only the wind, which whistled with gentle strength around the gables, towers, and corners, singing a song of freedom and vastness, reached his ears. The starry sky above the Gobi looked so unchanged that it was as if it had been waiting for him. The Tibetan could see the familiar constellations, the pockmarked disc of the Moon, and the building facades surrounding the Stardust Tower. The view gave him something akin to homesickness, but he couldn't bask in it. Even though it was deepest night and the population of the Terran Union's capital was largely in bed, he couldn't take unnecessary risks. He quickly scurried out of the elevator shed's shadow and over to the tower itself. There, in a loading channel for deliveries, he crouched down, closed his eyes, and enjoyed the triumph for one brief moment.

Lhundup felt the icy night air on his face and hands. It was incredible how quickly he had gotten used to warmth as soon as the ever-cold Changtang was behind him. The Gobi could be bitterly cold when it wanted to. Still, right now he perceived its temperature not as a punishment, but as a gift. He swallowed and swore once again to shelve his secret agent career after this mission.

Okay. Time for phase two. He opened his eyes again, peered out of his temporary hiding place, and looked around. His knowledge of the area paid off now: no more than a dozen meters stood between him and the tower's entrance, where he had met Mack and Rogen a few days earlier.

Lhundup saw that the door was closed, but he had expected nothing else. The Stardust Tower's employees only went back to their posts after sunrise, including the building crews on the day shift. He gulped, steeled his nerve, and started running, always staying close to the nearest wall. He reached the entrance unimpeded and—he hoped—unnoticed by tower security or any other vigilant citizens. At the least, no alarms had started ringing so far, and no angry cries echoed through the night.

He looked around again and found nothing to add to his worries. Then he raised his hand, tapped the flat input field beside the door—and realized with horror that he had forgotten the first code!

Dammit! Jun had told him the nine-digit number that was supposed to grant him access to the main entrance without being recorded in the electronic logbooks that were created automatically by the building's internal systems. With that number, he would be a digital ghost, Jun had promised, invisible to the security tech. The plan was flawless.

The plan, sure, Lhundup thought. *But not me.* Frustrated, he balled his hands into fists. What the hell was it? Something with nine? It was exasperating; he had repeated the code to himself over and over for hours to keep exactly this from happening, and now? Sure, he could violate the agreed-upon procedure a second time by pulling his pod out of his overalls and calling his employer early. But not only would that be *highly* embarrassing, such an obvious screwup was guaranteed to mutate Jun's already short thread of

patience into an explosive fuse of rage. And Lhundup could well do without that. He'd had more than enough tastes of that less-than-pleasant side of Jun in the past few days.

Lhundup took a deep breath. He had to hurry, he knew. The clinic Manoli and Haggard had set up was staffed even at night, and the apartments in the tower's upper floors certainly weren't all empty. He could be caught at any moment. He reached out again, hesitantly, softly running his fingertips over the number pad. What would James Bond do in this situation? *Trust his instincts,* was the answer that came at once. *Play a risky game and win.* That was how it went with secret agents, right? Lhundup would have to do the same if he really wanted to be one of them.

The rectangular panel beeped as he entered the numerical code exactly as it came into his mind. One. Seven. Zero. One. What next? He didn't know; he just listened to his gut, letting his fingers act on their own. There had to be nine digits, and he entered nine. And then...

"Incorrect combination. Entry not granted. Two attempts remaining."

Lhundup gaped at the writing on the small display above the buttons as if it were a puzzle he could solve through sheer bullheadedness. Only gradually did he grasp the short message's meaning, and he felt a chill. *Does the system record access attempts?* If so, whoever checked the logbook the next morning would be in for a surprise.

Or could Lhundup erase all proof of his mistake by successfully opening the door on his second attempt? He got to work again straight away, focusing, tapping the buttons.

"Incorrect combination. Entry not granted. One attempt remaining."

Until what? The unspoken threat on this thrice-cursed display made him all the more nervous. He felt the pressure as distinctly as if Jun were at his throat, and not only in the figurative sense. And as was so often the case when he was under duress to perform, he

totally locked up inside. Heavens, what was the stupid code?

It was no use, and he knew it. The more desperately he tried to focus on the forgotten string of numbers, the less he could remember it. He had only two options. He could call Jun, admit his failure, and beg for help. Or he could simply hope the failed access attempts didn't wind up in the log book, hurry back to the sleeping Rogen, and return underground as if nothing had happened. That would put off the confrontation with Jun until the next day.

Neither sounded especially appealing. The former was embarrassing and amounted to assisted suicide, while the latter was cowardly, though it did at least offer the chance of a few hours' sleep before Jun got angry. That spoke in favor of it.

Lhundup sighed, looked around for observers one more time—and paused. Was that an elevator?

On the tower's outer wall, about ten paces from the entrance, hung a narrow, silvery cabin. He had seen its like countless times but never really paid attention to them. Only now did he truly realize that it had to be for the maintenance staff's use, a gondola for the window cleaners. And he realized what that meant for him.

His thoughts raced. *Assuming it goes as far as the fiftieth floor...* He quickly took a few steps back, away from the tower, and looked upward. The structure made of ropes, anchorings, and unfamiliar alien technology indeed seemed to reach into infinity, and on every individual floor he could make out, one could get out and step onto a narrow ledge with a handrail that ran all the way around the tower.

This could work. It won't be pleasant, but it'll definitely beat a confrontation with Jun. If I can find Adams's window and open it with the second code, I'm back in the game.

Or was this only a stopgap? Either way, it was an option; that was all that mattered right now. It was his chance. He still knew the second code, the one for the office. With one hundred percent certainty. And a window could be an entrance too, right?

Lhundup ran over to the gondola. He effortlessly climbed over the roughly waist-height railing into the open-topped cabin, then looked at the rectangular touch screen console. After a few moments, he figured out how to get the thing moving.

He had ridden past the fourth floor when it finally occurred to him what he was doing. And above all, at what height. He froze in place. All the inner drive that had brought him this far disappeared in a puff of smoke. Unpleasant memories of Mack's steel beam came back to him. All of a sudden, Jun's rage felt like it would be sweet relief.

Don't look down! He gulped. *Just keep going and don't look down. Every floor is only one floor. Focus on the wall and the goal, not the journey.*

Easier said than done, of course. His knees felt like they were made of stone, his feet lead weights. His quivering hands wouldn't let go of the gondola's handrail anymore. He knew that nothing could happen to him—this maintenance elevator may have been temporary, but its fixtures were mounted firmly to the Stardust Tower's outer wall. Still, that knowledge couldn't drive away the fear. He didn't like heights. No, he did not like them one bit.

"I'm afraid the power might have gone to Adams's head," rang Bai Jun's voice in his mind again suddenly. Sentences that had been spoken during their conversation five hours ago stayed stuck in his memory. Words full of apprehension and sorrow. "Rhodan is on his way to Arkon, as you know. Pounder is...well, he's Pounder. And with Tifflor and Mercant, I've referred to Adams in a roundabout way so many times by now that I'm starting to feel embarrassed by it. No, there's no one here breathing down the hunchbacked old administrator's neck anymore who would question his instructions. No one but me—and he doesn't give me any relevant information. You see, Lhundup, this is the only way! We owe it to Rhodan and everyone who shares his vision to get to the bottom of Adams's strange behavior. First it was the energy from Guanhui. Who knows what he'll withhold from this city next? We have to stop him before he harms Terrania any further."

Lhundup swallowed dryly. Bai Jun was right; there was no doubt

about that. This had to happen. The future of the entire Terrania project might depend on it. What did a herdsman and his fear of heights matter compared to the future?

"Pull yourself together, you cowardly yak!" he said, murmuring the rebuke that he felt he deserved. "Grit your teeth and do what you have to do."

His voice was quaking at least as much as his hands. But then pride welled up in him. His stomach and nerves may have been fighting against it, but Lhundup, the secret agent, was on his way!

...and fifty. Lhundup panted as he pressed the touch screen again, bringing the gondola to a stop. Stars reflected off the tower's panoramic windows. It took him two attempts before he gathered enough courage to leave the gondola and step onto the ledge. Then he sank to his knees and leaned his back against the tower's cool, smooth outer wall. Torrents of sweat were running down his face, and his breathing sounded like he urgently needed a new lung.

For one thing, there was the height. For another, there were the many times the gondola had wobbled ominously during the journey and made strange noises. He didn't know how long this excruciating trip up the tallest building on Earth had taken, but on the horizon, he could see clearly from his box seat that the sun was preparing to rise. The black of night was gradually receding, and the first hints of reddish golden morning had appeared in its place. Lhundup decided to ignore the rest of the view on offer—especially the portion below him.

I have to hurry, he thought. He had put all his eggs in one basket. If the window to Adams's office didn't open from outside or needed a different code, this had all been for naught. *Don't think about "if"! Think of your mission.* That was a good saying, he knew. One that would have been worthy of Uncle Dalaimoc.

So, which way to Adams? Lhundup looked around. The ledge was about a meter and a half wide and bordered by a slender handrail. This was no place to hang around if you didn't absolutely have to; that much was clear.

Lhundup was about to force himself to his feet when he paused. Was he imagining things or had something just moved in the corner of his eye? He cautiously turned his head and peered into the window he was crouching beside. The room was still dark inside. Nothing stirred.

Must have been a reflection or something. My mind's playing tricks on me.

When the figure appeared by the glass, he could have screamed in fright. This was it. They'd caught him. Out here on the one-and-a-half-meter-wide ledge in thin air, there was no getting away. And all because he couldn't remember a nine-digit number!

The figure opened the window, and Lhundup's jaw dropped.

"I thought you'd be hiding around here somewhere," said Ai Guo hoarsely. "So you noticed her, huh?" He smiled, but his eyes remained serious. His lungs seemed to be bothering him again.

Lhundup was too baffled to answer the question. Not that he could have done so anyway.

"Come in!" the old foreman continued, extending his calloused paw. Sweat beaded his lined forehead. "I checked a moment ago and she's still on her way up. I figure we can go the rest of the way to the sixtieth by anti-grav."

Lhundup took the man's hand and let himself be helped into the building. Beyond the window was a wonderfully normal office. A place that didn't induce vertigo at all. "She?" he asked, perplexed. "Who are you talking about?"

Ai Guo waved a hand dismissively. "Come on, pipsqueak. The one you're following. Zhuo Hui. Who else would be climbing up the outside of the building? I'm telling you, Lhundup, whatever that girl is up to, it's happening. Right here, right now!"

13.

Face to Face

Topsid

The Morning After the Festival

As Gihl-Khuan's warning cry rang out, Khatleen-Tarr swung the lamp upward—and Manoli froze. Hatchlings! The sewer tunnel's entire ceiling suddenly looked full of them. Two, four...more and more of the roughly one-meter-eighty-tall, pale-scaled musclemen jumped down from the ceiling and landed on the stone walkway, growling. Slender, sinewy, agile creatures with sharp claws and bloodlust in their eyes. They wore no clothing, and their bodies bore the scabs of battle wounds from fighting among themselves.

"Erikk, the beamer!"

Manoli switched gears at once. He drew back to the wall, avoiding the foe aiming at him by a hair, and fired at the pair trying to take Gihl-Khuan to the cleaners. They were stun shots, he'd made extra sure of that, and the first already hit the right-hand hatchling straight in the chest, throwing him off the back of the Topsidan wildly flailing underneath him.

He didn't manage a second. Manoli was about to fire again when one of the pale monsters descended on his neck, the hatchling's weight knocking him to his knees. He groaned, swung his weapon around, and fired aimlessly over his shoulder.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw three enemies closing in on Khatleen-Tarr at once. She skillfully dodged the first and kicked the second's wiry legs out from under him in the same motion. The hatchling tumbled backwards, losing balance, and landed in the pitch-black sewer water with a loud splash. What number three did, Manoli couldn't say, because—while still on his knees—he suddenly found himself surrounded by five of the monstrosities.

Clawed lizard hands, caked with the blood of prior victims, reached for him. They wrapped around his chest, squeezing the air from him. Manoli gasped. However hard he struggled in their grasp, he could barely move his arms. The weight on his shoulders forced him to the ground, robbing him of the option of using his legs to fight back. His fingers slid from the beam weapon's trigger.

The hatchling on Manoli's back yanked his head back and he found himself looking directly into large eyes and sharp teeth. A warm, rough, damp lizard tongue ran along his face.

"Arrrkonnnideee!" the creature hissed threateningly.

Suddenly, Gihl-Khuan was there. Manoli couldn't have said where the Topsidan had come from or what had happened to his own opponents, but now Gihl-Khuan cut a swath through the ones surrounding them. With unbelievable strength, he grabbed one hatchling after another and lifted them into the air. Manoli heard bones cracking and knew they didn't belong to the mysterious Topsidan.

As soon as he could move his arms again, he joined in. He fired frantically, hitting with almost every shot. Stunned hatchlings rained to the floor around him. Next, he tensed his muscles, pushed off against the walkway, and jumped. The uncomfortably high Topsidian gravity nagged at him again, but his plan worked! He executed a kind of midair somersault. As hoped, this shook off the enemy on his back, letting him follow up with a targeted shot while the creature was still lying on the stone ground.

No sooner had the energy beam ebbed away than a loud crack resounded and Khatleen-Tarr screamed. Manoli spun around to look, but suddenly, all was dark.

"The lamp," Gihl-Khuan wheezed nearby. "One of the vermin must have smashed it. Nissenshit!"

Manoli held out the beamer's barrel in the direction he assumed Khatleen-Tarr was, cautiously aimed high up toward the sewer ceiling, and pulled the trigger. For a split-second, the energy blast cut through the darkness in a flash of light. Manoli saw the

Topsidan being carried towards the canal by three hatchlings who had grabbed her and lifted her into the air. Then the darkness returned.

He fired again, forcing the darkness away to reveal another momentary image: four hatchlings were already rushing him, and behind them, the clamoring Khatleen-Tarr plunged into the wastewater flow, still caught in their merciless foes' grips.

"After them!" Manoli cried, but it was too late. Half a dozen albino lizards were right in front of him.

Gihl-Khuan had already thrown himself into the fray. Here he rammed an opponent, there he flung one behind him with a broken spine. He seemed to have regard for nothing and no one, least of all himself.

The Terran had no time to marvel at his strength and aptitude. For every fallen hatchling, two seemed to take their place. If he wanted to help Khatleen-Tarr, he had to act fast. He raised the weapon again, sending two of the closest albinos into the land of dreams with well-aimed shots and was about to attack the third when something hard and sharp hit him in the back of the knee.

From behind! Damn, they boxed us in!

Manoli collapsed. His calf suddenly felt warm, and as he realized that it must be because of the blood clearly flowing down his leg, he collided with the walkway. The hatchlings were upon him in an instant. One yanked the beamer out of his hand.

Manoli yelled out in anger, frustration, and dismay. *No! Not like this, dammit!*

He mobilized unsuspected reserves of strength, rearing up and dodging to the side, failed. The weight of the lizards on his back, arms, and legs was far too great for him to fight, and gravity and exhaustion took care of the rest. Razor-sharp claws scratched his skin where none of the Rrakass fur was left to protect it. He groaned. The pain was immense, but the worry more so. Where were the others? What had happened to Khatleen-Tarr?

Hot breath hit his neck. A clawed hand that felt as heavy as an anvil grabbed him by the hair and pushed his head onto the stone as if trying to crush it like an orange. Manoli wheezed and spat blood. Then he saw something flashing and the weight on his body lessened. Hatchlings hissed; they were struggling against something he couldn't make out. Taking advantage of the confusion, he again pushed off the ground, where he had been forced down onto his stomach, then rolled free and got to his knees.

For a moment, dizziness threatened to overwhelm him until he registered Gihl-Khuan at the edge of his vision. A small device on the supposed rebel's wrist, barely larger than an eccentric bangle, was blinking in the darkness, giving off a little light. Enough to give Manoli a glimpse of what was happening.

The Topsidan had hurried to his rescue again. Relentlessly, he doled out punishment, punching and kicking around him, thwarting a hatchling with almost every movement. Gaping wounds appeared in white lizard flesh; lifeless bodies fell to the ground again and again and again. Gihl-Khuan wasn't fighting for his life, Manoli recognized. He was living for the fight.

Khat!

The thought of his companion pulled Manoli away from his astonishment. Where was she? No matter how hard he strained his eyes, he couldn't make out her or her three opponents. *In the water,* he assumed, then he felt his way to the walkway's edge and froze again. The awful gurgling was audible even over the rushing of the sewage. *They're drowning her,* he realized with horror, and jumped into the stinking broth without a moment's hesitation.

A dozen or so hurriedly waded meters later, his suspicion was confirmed. Khatleen-Tarr had become the hatchlings' plaything and was dying for their enjoyment. A sliver of light was coming from a narrow side tunnel, enough to illuminate the gruesome scene that emerged from the darkness before him: Khatleen-Tarr, waving her arms, tail, and legs as much as her torturers' inexorable grasp would allow, was on her back in the water surrounded by hatchlings. The young lizards paid no particular mind to Kikerren, who was flying in circles around them, attacking them over and over. They plunged

the already visibly weakened Topsidan woman into the sewer flow, delighting in her vehement yet futile resistance. Manoli saw her head rise out of the flow, spluttering and gasping, then the sadistic creatures forced her into the cold wetness again, perhaps forever.

Something exploded somewhere in his mind, and he started running. Pain was forgotten; fear was forgotten. Although he knew on an intellectual level how little he measured up to these monsters, none of that mattered in the moment. In a few steps, he had closed the distance, but no sooner did he raise his arms to attack than the first strikes hit him. Manoli cried out—in rage, anguished, helplessness—and lashed out with his fists. For every hit that he doled out, he took at least three, but he kept going, *had* to keep going. His gut was driving his actions.

He screamed as one of the monsters' clawed hands struck his temple. Half his face suddenly felt like it was on fire, then the world began to spin before his eyes. *No!* he ordered himself, horror-stricken. *Stay on your feet! Fight!*

If he toppled now, it was all over. He heard Kikerren's hiss of lamentation, saw the hatchlings' malicious gazes...and then his knees gave out and the water surrounded him too.

New York. The mountains by the Canadian border. Afternoons in Italian gardens. Perry Rhodan and Reg Bull in front of the *Stardust*. Crest. Terrania. In quick succession, snapshots of his life flashed before his mind's eye as his real eyes closed. His lungs felt like they were burning as they practically screamed for oxygen, but he was too weak, too tired. So terribly, terminally tired.

Manoli's senses ebbed away. Then a hand grabbed him by the arm, hard as a vise, and pulled him back to the surface.

"Stay with me, you got that?" a familiar voice demanded in hiss. "Don't give up!"

He felt two light slaps, right and left on his cheeks. He blinked in protest and saw Khatleen-Tarr looking back at him. The Topsidan was pale but alive. Her breath was rattling and fitful; her scales gleamed wetly. There was no trace of the hatchlings who had tried

to drown her. Kikerren landed on her shoulder.

“H... How?” Manoli stammered, his voice weak. “Where are...”

“Floating unconscious towards the purification facility,” she replied quietly with a shrug. “Or wherever this canal ends. I reckon I still had a little more life in me than they thought. And your distraction maneuver came at just the right moment. Thanks, belly slicer!”

Manolo nodded. He just couldn’t manage anything more; without Khatleen-Tarr’s supportive hands, he wouldn’t have even been able to stay on his feet.

“Gihl-Khuan?” the young lizard woman asked, worried.

“Last I saw him,” Eric wheezed, “he was being buried under a mountain of hatchlings.”

Not even he could have survived that, right? And if he hadn’t, it was clear what would happen next: Gihl-Khuan’s murderers might already be on the trail of their next two victims and could emerge from the shadows and grab them again at any moment.

Just then, he heard splashing sounds in the water. Someone was approaching. Manoli tensed his muscles and gripped Khatleen-Tarr’s hand. Then he saw the blinking light again, heard a quiet voice, and felt endless relief.

Gihl-Khuan emerged from the darkness, the beamer in his right hand. He, too, was bleeding from several small wounds, but didn’t seem bothered by it. When he saw them, he just nodded.

There’s no way he... Manoli furrowed his brow. *Whatever you are, my friend, you’re definitely not the naive rebel you claim to be. Which I knew already.*

How many hatchlings had stood in the Topsidan’s way back there on the walkway? And what had become of them? Breathless, he listened for pursuers, but none came. The only noise, apart from all of their panting, was the continual rushing of the waste water flow.

It was over. Bewildered, Manoli looked at his companion, and although he might have been mistaken, he thought he saw his assessment of Gihl-Khuan mirrored in her lizard face. She cast an approving look at Gihl-Khuan, then squeezed Manoli's hand more tightly.

"Let's keep moving. I think the exit Kikerren was pointing us to is up ahead."

The flying lizard hissed a confirmation and rose up into the stuffy air. Manoli and the others followed her into the light.

You know your mission, said the Positronic's sober voice in his mind. *Carry it out!*

"You know your mission," urged the anything-but-sober voice of the Positronic from the hidden speaker on the armband, which was apparently not so broken after all. "Kindly get it done, hunter!"

I know my mission, Gihl-Khuan thought, looking helplessly back and forth between his old digital companion to the two fugitives striding ahead of him. *But do I know myself?*

There was the flying lizard and there was the Arkonide. As if fate had sent him two reference points of his time on Buntayn made flesh, all to deprive him of his self-assurance once and for all. And there was the defective Postrionic, which in his mind sounded like a fatherly friend but in his ears sounded more like Megh-Takarr. Since when did it make audible noise? Since when did its display light up as if there was still life in the ruined device?

"Hunter!" demanded the acoustically perceptible voice once again. "What are you doing? What are you waiting for? Bring me my prize, is that clear? I want that Arkonide!"

Gihl-Khuan thought of the despot in his palace above the city's roofs. Of the three-dimensional hologram in a ship's command center that might have only existed in his dreams. Of flying lizards basking in the sun on the fishing creek's rocks behind the cave, watching a shipwrecked inhabitant search for tasty insects. He

thought of the powerful and of the power of lies. Had Megh-Takarr just manipulated him, perhaps? What was fact and what was fiction? Where was the loyalty he'd felt towards the despot for all these years? Where had it gone? One night of doubt had been enough to destroy it. And in its place stood only question marks.

"Gihl-Khuan, what are you doing? Kill her! Kill the traitor!" Yes, that unmistakably sounded like Megh-Takarr.

"Look for the profound; avoid what surprises you; the strong need a firm footing." So demanded the seventh clause of the Social Directive. But was that still possible? Gihl-Khuan had clung to experience, seeking a foothold in the routine of a hunter, but that foothold was no longer there. Avoid what surprised him? He might as well have been asked to paint the sky green.

You know your mission, repeated the broken Positronic factually in his imagination. And then: *You do, don't you?*

"No," Gihl-Khuan whispered, and in his sad heart, an entire world exploded.

Terrania

January 21, 2037

Inside the Stardust Tower, all was blissfully peaceful. Nothing indicated that these rooms and hallways would be filled with bustling activity again in little more than two hours. Lhundup and Ai Guo hurried to the anti-grav shaft in the building's center without encountering a single soul. The old man actually looked slightly beleaguered; several times, he had to stop briefly to catch his breath.

"Ai Guo, about your elevator key..."

"Don't be silly, pipsqueak." The foreman shook his head as he wheezed. "Forget about it. I'd have done the exact same thing in your position. You see, right? Instead of informing the authorities, I

also decided to take matters into my own hands."

Lhundup nodded. He didn't really understand much of what was happening right now, but he knew about Ai Guo's distaste for anything resembling public officials. He decided to put his guilty conscience to one side for now and turn to the other aspects of this mind-boggling adventure. There were more than enough of those, after all.

"How did you even get into the building?"

A smile crept across the wide-haired giant's face. "There's a special code that opens the main door without leaving any trace. If you know it, it's easy as pie. And, well, let's put it this way: I have my sources." He looked at Lhundup. "Don't worry, the code's constantly changed. Right now, though, it's surprisingly simple. A single digit. The number nine."

Crap! Lhundup could have kicked himself. Of course! It hadn't been a nine-digit number, but just the number nine. How could he have forgotten that? *Nerves,* he thought, immediately answering his own question. *Fear of my own mission and of Jun's short fuse, given how unusually on edge he is.*

They reached the shaft and stepped into the anti-grav field. Once more, Lhundup didn't feel comfortable in his own skin as he lost contact with the ground and floated weightlessly upward. This method was markedly easier than using the cleaning gondolas, to be sure, but almost as unpleasant in its own way.

"Have you learned any more about Zhuo Hui's intentions?" Ai Guo asked as soon as they had arrived on the sixtieth floor. "I'm sure you've been keeping an eye on more than just her pretty face."

Lhundup silently shook his head. The old man overestimated him, that was clear as day, but it was nice to be trusted *more* than was justified for a change. He didn't want to shatter Ai Guo's illusions about him. How did you disappoint someone without disappointing them?

The sixtieth floor had hardly changed since Lhundup's last visit.

Cables protruded from holes, and tools lay everywhere. Icy wind whistled around the support columns and dividing walls that would one day be apartments and offices. Floor and ceiling were still unplastered, with many outer walls largely missing. Lhundup looked at the sky—and then quickly looked elsewhere.

Ai Guo, however, stepped over to the edge, craned his neck, and looked upward. Then he nodded. “I see her,” he murmured as the morning wind tugged at his hair and overalls as if trying to pull him off the building to certain death. “Still, she’s a hefty number of floors ahead of us. She’s climbing up the scaffolding now.”

Lhundup furrowed his brow and wrapped his arm more tightly around the pillar he was—not too obviously, he hoped—clinging to. “Why would she do that? If she’s trying to get to the top, she could go hundreds of stories in a flash using an elevator.” *Just don’t tell me we have to follow her lead!*

“I wish I knew,” Ai Guo replied, his voice a rumble as he came back. “Presumably, her goal is somewhere on the tower’s outer surface. Or she’s placing things at regular intervals on the facade or the scaffold.”

“Things,” Lhundup repeated with emphasis. Then he looked into the man’s eyes and knew that they were both thinking the same. *Bombs. Ai Guo thinks Zhuo Hui is going to detonate explosives on the Stardust Tower. He believes she’s a terrorist.*

Could he blame him? And, far more importantly: could he discount it? Lhundup thought back to Zhuo Hui’s odd behavior, her aggressive propensity for secretiveness, the strange nighttime encounter with her in the underground caverns. He thought of Ai Guo’s words of warning. And he realized that the only answer he could give to both questions was a resounding “No.”

A chill ran through him, and it wasn’t due to the wind. He looked at Ai Guo. “What do we do?” he asked quietly.

“We take the elevator,” the man answered seriously, taking a slim, jet-black pistol out of the inside pocket of his work clothes. “We apprehend her. And then we do whatever we must to protect

the tower. Got it?"

Lhundup stared at the weapon, a decommissioned model from the Chinese army just like Jun had. Then he swallowed dryly and nodded.

What had Perry Rhodan been thinking when he'd picked the Gobi of all places to found his city? Didn't he know how bitterly cold it got here in winter? Especially two thousand meters off the ground!

Shivering, Lhundup got out of the elevator and wrapped his arms around his upper body. If he'd known where this cloak-and-dagger operation would lead, he would definitely have worn warmer clothes. The elevator they had taken sadly lacked a locker they could have conveniently produced thick jackets out of. What he wouldn't have given for a pair of padded gloves. By now, Jun probably thought he had fallen asleep on the job.

No, he corrected himself. *Be honest, Lhundup. If you'd known where this morning would lead, you'd have run off into the desert, screaming.*

He was there again. Not far below the top of the tower. Somewhere in the six hundreds; he'd long since given up counting.

"There! Do you see her?" Ai Guo cried.

Lhundup followed the man's outstretched finger with his gaze. There she was indeed: Zhuo Hui. The petite Chinese woman was wearing an all-black bodysuit, a black knit cap, and black climbing shoes. On her back, she wore a bulky backpack of the same color, from which two silvery tubes protruded. It looked heavy and somehow threatening. Was that where she was carrying the bombs? She was hanging from the scaffolding about twenty meters above their heads, continuing to climb unwaveringly. The height didn't seem to bother her in the slightest. She wasn't even secured by a rope.

They had been following the young woman using the elevator

for quite a while now, occasionally stopping so that Ai Guo could check she was still going. So far, she had given no indication that she knew about their presence. Nor had she slowed down.

"She means to go right up to the top, Lhundup, I'm telling you. To the very tip of the tower."

"And then?" he asked through chattering teeth.

The older man shook his head. "We have to make sure there is no 'and then.'" He held out the army revolver to Lhundup. His hands were trembling. "But I'm afraid you have to take over from here, pipsqueak," he said. The thin air was clearly affecting him—especially since, by all appearances, he wasn't doing too well anyway.

Horrified, Lhundup realized what he was saying. "You... You can't mean..."

"There's no other way, kid. Believe me, I wish I could take this job off your hands, but my ticker's not playing along with these heights anymore. And I was never a very good climber. But you, you're younger and more nimble."

Lhundup began to stammer. "But... But..."

"Stop her!" Ai Guo's gaze was like an arrow fired directly at him, from which there was no cover. "Find out what she's up to. And if you have to act, do it. Your heart is in the right place. I know you'll do the right thing."

Lhundup shook his head. With courage born of desperation, he stepped over to the edge again, put his shaking hands up to his mouth, and shouted the mysterious Chinese woman's name as loudly as he could. But however hard he strained, Zhuo Hui didn't react. The wind and the distance kept her from hearing him.

The old man took Lhundup's hand, placed the weapon's grip in it, and folded Lhundup's fingers around it. Lhundup stared as if his hand belonged to someone else. Then he felt Ai Guo's right hand on his shoulder, just like he had before by the anti-grav minecarts. It

felt fatherly.

“Go,” Ai Guo said softly. “I know you can do it.”

Lhundup gulped. He looked his shift leader in the eyes, nodded silently, stowed the revolver in his overalls, and got up onto the scaffold. The structure was similar to a fire escape, even if the latter seemed decidedly wider, safer, and classier by comparison. Up here, everything was just bare metal and aluminum, hooks and eyelets, brackets and screws, sheet metal plates. Narrow stepladders, cold as arctic ice, led from one floor up to the next, and their mounts squeaked whenever he stepped on a rung.

And yet, he climbed onward. He could practically feel Ai Guo’s gaze on him. That gaze was the safety rope he didn’t have. Ai Guo’s trust was Lhundup’s security.

Until he got to the top and saw the platform.

Mack had done good work; there was no doubt about that. Since Lhundup’s last visit, the Stardust Tower had gotten taller, and the engineer had clearly already taken this into account. The initiation for new crew members now took place markedly higher up than before, as the view made frighteningly clear. And at the end of the wretched steel beam—out on the small white platform—crouched Zhuo Hui.

The young woman had her back turned to Lhundup and the tower. She was fumbling with her backpack; he could make that out, at least. But why?

Again, he called her name, and again came no response. Which meant he would have to do this the hard way. *Shit!*

Lhundup looked around in vain for the safety harness. No locker meant no equipment. He suddenly felt sick.

“Happiness comes to those who know how to ignore their own little problems when they have to.” Little problems? He sighed in despair. It had been all well and good for Jun to say that, but which of them

was now standing all the way up here with no way back?

Cautiously, he swung his legs over the scaffold's railing and touched the beam with both soles. His hands and his knees were competing to see which could shake harder. His heart threatened to break off its friendship with him. His breathing sounded like an old man's, and that had nothing to do with the thin air. Two thousand meters. And there he was. It didn't get any crazier than this.

Lhundup gritted his teeth to stop the chattering and ignored the heavy weight in his stomach. Then he heaved his upper body after his feat, spread out his arms out for balance…and went down to his knees in a flash when they began to flail wildly in the air!

N… No problem. I'll just go on all fours. Easy does it.

He must have looked a pathetic sight: a grown man crawling like a baby, ghostly pale and with jittering lips as he forced himself forward. Tears of panic welled in his eyes, obscuring his vision, until he blinked them away.

I wish I had a quadrotor. One of those aircraft with four flexible rotors would have been ideal for this mission. *Hindsight is 20/20, I suppose.*

The steel beam was cold and flat, Zhuo Hui no more than twenty meters away. Lhundup called to her, but the voice that escaped his throat was so weak and fearful that he could hardly hear it himself. He took a deep breath and began to sing quietly. He didn't know when he had last struck up one of the traditional *t'ong-skad*; since leaving the pastures of his home, he'd had little need in his life for the field and work songs from old Tibet. Now, though, as he hung above the Gobi with a pounding heart and rebellious viscera, he found the tunes he had learned in early childhood from his parents and siblings pleasantly reassuring.

Suddenly, the wind picked up, tugging harder than ever at his short hair and overalls—and before Lhundup could stop it, the pod Jun had given him slid out of his pocket and fell into airy nothingness. Then, as if having fulfilled its task, the wind subsided again.

Lhundup closed his eyes. *That doesn't matter. Stay calm! Keep it together!*

The voice of Rogen, the Scandinavian man, resounded in his memory—"*Last week, someone even tried to do a handstand"*—and forced that too back into his mental dungeon, to where he was keeping his fear. This wasn't the time for thinking, but for calm, *t'ong-skad*, and the path ahead.

He was midway through the third song when he reached the platform. Zhuo Hui spun around. The dismay in her features turned to bafflement, then the bafflement turned to aggression, all in the blink of an eye.

"What are *you* doing here?" she demanded. Without letting him out of her sight, she shouldered the backpack again.

Lhundup wanted to answer, but his mouth refused to follow orders, and his mind felt empty. He was surprised at himself when his hand, in a bizarre displacement activity, reached into his overalls and drew Ai Guo's weapon.

Zhuo Hui was not nearly so stupefied. The army revolver's black barrel had barely gleamed in the rising desert sun when the young woman grabbed Lhundup by the forearm and dropped backwards, pulling him with her and spinning him around. Before he knew it, he was lying on his back on the platform where she was crouching, looking into the dark, deadly muzzle.

"Last chance, Lhundup," Zhuo Hui snarled. Anger and astonishment competed in her gaze. "What are you doing here?"

If she pulled the trigger, he was done for, and perhaps the tower was too. Hell, pull the trigger? All she needed to do was give him a little shove. No one but Ai Guo would know the whole truth, not even Jun.

Lhundup was closer to death than ever, yet he felt entirely calm. He looked into the round hole before his eyes as if he would find the answers in there, without which he wouldn't surrender.

“To stop you. To prevent you from…from blowing up the Stardust Tower.”

Her eyes widened. For a brief moment, all Lhundup heard was the wind. Then she burst out laughing. “From doing *what?* Honestly, Tibetan, you’re the weirdest person I’ve ever met.”

“And not as dumb as you might think,” he accused her, stunned again by his own courage. “I saw you down there in the night and here on the scaffold. Why so secretive, huh? Why all this effort, all this risk? Why do it if not to sabotage what Rhodan and his confidants are trying to build here?”

Zhuo Hui looked at the weapon, then back to him. “You know you have to take the safety off before using one of these, right?” she asked with a mischievous grin, and gave it back to him.

“What?” He marveled at her.

“Little tip for next time, Lhundup: if a woman asks you to keep your distance, do it. I don’t want to do anything to the tower. Are you insane? Just because you don’t understand what makes me tick, you jump straight to thinking I’m a terrorist?”

“What?” he repeated, as if his entire vocabulary consisted of only this one word. Then at least a small group of the others returned. “Then what *are* you doing?”

Zhuo Hui stood up to her full height and reached for the straps of her backpack with her gloved hands. “I’ve already been up the Shanghai Tower and the Burj Khalifa. After One World Trade Center, I sat in a Homeland Security cell for three weeks before those paranoid Americans finally got that I was no danger to them. And my holofilm of China 117 is viewed online by hundreds of thousands of people every day.” Once again, she cast him a reproachful glare, but she smiled too, as honestly and amusedly as at their first encounter. “So, Lhundup, if it’s all right with you, I’m going to expand my list to include the *new* tallest building in the world. Okay?”

Then, with a look of pure joy on her face, she jumped off the

platform before Lhundup's very eyes. He screamed and threw himself forward, but he was too late to catch her. He watched her fall, as dismayed as he was helpless. Only when her parachute opened far below him did he realize the sheer astonishment had made him forget all about his fear of heights.

Epilogue

Robinson's Fear

"Look, come on, dammit. It's called BASE jumping. An extreme sport, okay? It's not dangerous, and if it is, then only for me. Why are you Terrans all so paranoid?"

Lhundup and Ai Guo could already hear Zhuo Hui's ranting when they stepped out of the Stardust Tower's main entrance. By now, the sun was already pretty high in the sky. On the streets around the imposing building, there was already far more activity than was typical for this time of day. The young Chinese woman's breathtaking jump appeared to have attracted legions of onlookers.

And tower security. Two men wearing the building's guard uniform—gray trousers and windbreakers with the Terran Union logo emblazoned on the sleeves—flanked Zhuo Hui where she stood on the forecourt. Lhundup even knew one of them already. Brettinger, the wiry, ponytailed man of German origin, had helped out when Buming had involved him, Cui, and Jun in her suspenseful scheme. Had that really only been a few days ago?

If looks could kill, Brettinger would have slaughtered Zhuo Hui then and there. Some of the man's colleagues were busy keeping the crowd of rubberneckers and passersby under control.

"I think you'd better come with us," Brettinger rumbled in accented Terran. "We'll clear this up at the station."

The young lady looked far from thrilled. "And what about my parachute, huh? It's still hanging off the window cleaners' elevator, as you see."

"Let us worry about that," the guard replied. He turned his head slightly, having apparently received a call on his headset.

Lhundup looked at Ai Guo. The old man laughed. "Go on already! I know you want to."

“And you? You need to go to the doctor, Ai Guo. Someone should go with you and—”

The foreman waved a dismissive hand. “I’ll find someone. Rogen should have had a good night’s sleep by now, and he’ll have time. Besides, I’m feeling a lot better anyway. Don’t worry.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Lhundup saw Zhuo Hui make a half-hearted attempt to blend in with the ranks of bystanders. Brettinger and his colleagues thwarted it with ease. The German grinned maliciously as he rewarded her by locking her in handcuffs.

“Now go and help her!” Ai Guo insisted quietly. He winked knowingly. “A good word from the mayor’s assistant is likely to reduce her punishment quite a bit. That might improve her opinion of you again.”

The mayor, Lhundup thought. In all the chaos and excitement, he had forgotten all about Jun, Adams, and all that other business. For a moment, he felt completely helpless again. What should he do? Even if Ai Guo didn’t need an escort anymore, as he insisted, did Lhundup really dare keep the former general waiting any longer?

“Yes, fine, I’ll come with you. No need to be so rough.

Zhuo Hui’s half-rebellious, half-resigned capitulation in the face of the authorities’ strength echoed across the Stardust Tower’s forecourt, jolting Lhundup out of his thoughts. He looked at her. Brettinger and co. were already leading her to a side entrance of the building. She didn’t exactly look happy about the treatment, and some loud discontent started coming from the crowd of onlookers too.

My pod’s been smashed to bits anyway, thought the former herdsman. *So I can’t report back to Jun, right?* Sometimes things were simpler than they seemed.

“Hey!” he cried, finally stepping out of the building’s shadow and into the light. “Brettinger, wait!”

The guard stopped and turned his head. An expression full of

surprise dominated his habitually unshaven face. “Is she with you or something, Lhundup?”

The young Tibetan looked at Zhuo Hui. Her eyes held a spark that he could translate without the slightest difficulty: *Don’t you dare!*

Lhundup smirked. “You could say that. I’ll... I’ll give you a quick rundown, okay?”

Topsid

After the Festival

“All right, that’s enough,” Khatleen-Tarr hissed, reaching impatiently for the beam weapon.

Manoli put a hand on her arm. “No, Khat,” he said softly. “Leave it be. He...saved us all.”

Khatleen-Tarr looked back at the ventilation shaft through which they had emerged from the sewer system and shook her head. Then she cursed but remained seated next to Manoli in the sand.

The shaft had led them outside at last, and although several minutes had passed since then, Manoli could hardly draw his gaze away from the new scenery that his tired eyes offered. So, this was Groogwain. Light-brown sand stretched out in three of the four cardinal directions, covering a plain that was sometimes flatter, sometimes hillier, and covered in faint fog. The Topsidian midday son’s warming light shone from the slightly violet-hued sky. Some distance away, an enormous mountain range jutted out of the ground, higher than any Manoli had ever seen. It appeared to surround almost the entire plain, and looked both rugged and absolutely insurmountable. Only one side was left open—the one where Kerh-Onf was situated.

The city that had played host to him for weeks now, taking its toll and pushing him to his limits, gleamed in the sunlight. From

here, about one kilometer away, the vast metropolis made an almost friendly impression. Only the dark plumes of smoke rising up here and there amid the torpedo-shaped towers and other fascinating constructions stood testament to the unrest that was evidently still ongoing in the streets. Manoli almost thought he could hear sounds of battle drifting towards him on the wind.

His gaze wandered further and found the object of Khatleen-Tarr's ire: Gihl-Khuan was still standing in the entrance to the ventilation shaft, an L-shaped tube of black stone ending in an a rectangular opening—about two meters by two meters—secured by an iron grating with thick bars. With the beam weapon and his impressive stubbornness, the Topsdian wearing three-moon clothing had damaged the grating enough that they could squeeze through the bars, but he himself had not yet stepped into the sandy outside world.

Instead, he was crouching on the threshold, half in sunlight and half in shadow, looking at the technical doohickey on his wrist. The blinking had stopped by now, as had the odd voice Manoli thought he'd heard from the small device during the last few stretches of their march through the sewers, at least to his knowledge—assuming it hadn't been a figment of his imagination to begin with. But Gihl-Khuan was still moving his lips, as if speaking quietly into the strange armband. Whatever the conversation was about, it wasn't a pleasant one; the Topsidan's expression and the balled hands he swung through the air in fury now and again, made that more than clear.

"He's lost his mind, Erikk, trust me." Khatleen-Tarr's gaze was as cold as her tone. Although they were sitting outside of Gihl-Khuan's hearing range, she spoke pointedly quietly. Her hand still rested on the beam weapon's grip. "I saw this a lot back in the Vega system. Fighters who had the last remnants of their wits sapped away by battle. Men and women who entered the fray as autonomous individuals and left it as babbling, drooling deadweight for their comrades—if they came out at all. And some of those poor creatures were too far gone to tell friend from foe anymore."

She looked at Manoli.

“Yes, he saved us. Yes, he could have let us die many times or even killed us himself if he’d wanted to. We’re in his debt; you’re totally right about that. But I’m telling you now: in *this* condition, he doesn’t deserve our trust anymore. He’s unpredictable and unreliable, and that makes him a risk—to you, to me, to Sharp-Eyes, and to himself.”

“Does that mean killing him straight away? Couldn’t we just, I don’t know, take the beamer off him?”

Khatleen-Tarr burst into humorless laughter. “This man took out close to a dozen hatchlings with his bare hands—in the dark!—and ended up with little more than a few scratches, at least on the outside. He’s a fighting machine, Erikk. Do you think he’ll need a beamer if he suddenly attacks us in a fit of madness?”

Manoli didn’t know what was going on in the secretive Topsidan man’s mind. But he knew the feeling of having reached his limits. The fear of not being able to withstand the pressure any longer, of never again being able to return to the normality he’d lost. Of feeling alienated. That was Robinson’s fear, pure and simple. Superficially, Gihl-Khuan matched up perfectly with Khatleen-Tarr’s tragic yet rational assessment. But the superficial was often misleading.

Manoli stood up and started walking over to him.

“What are you *doing?*” Khatleen-Tarr hissed after him, her voice equal parts horror and worry.

Manoli looked over his shoulder at her questioning face. “I’m a healer, not a judge,” he said softly. He didn’t stop moving.

When he reached the grating, Kikerren, who had so far been happily chasing sunbeams, landed on Gihl-Khuan’s shoulder. At once, the Topsidan lowered his fists and looked up from his armband. His lizard eyes glimmered wetly, his tongue darted out of his mouth several times, and Manoli saw no madness in his gaze, but rather a mixture of resignation and liberation.

“Arkonide,” he greeted him in a rumble once he noticed Manoli’s

presence. Then he laughed quietly, as if in response to a joke he had told only to himself.

“Tell me, Gihl-Khuan,” Manoli began, “who have you been speaking to all this time?”

Kikerren gently nudged Gihl-Khuan with her beak. A smile formed at the corners of his mouth as he removed the armband with the peculiar Positronic from his wrist and held it up. “With ghosts,” he replied. “Ghosts of the past.”

Manoli looked from the blinking piece of tech and leather to the man and then back again, and was momentarily lost for words. There were situations that no medical course on Earth could prepare you for, though his professors from back in the day would no doubt see it differently. “And what are they saying?” he asked, uninspired.

“That’s not important,” Gihl-Khaun said—and he threw the armband into the shaft behind him in a high arch.

Manoli thought he heard a squawking sound—a word?—from the armband, then it disappeared, swallowed by the darkness and the rushing of the underground sewer flow.

For a moment, he looked at the man in silence. Although he didn’t understand what had just happened, he sensed that this moment held great meaning for the Topsidan. “Why did you do that?”

Kikerren spread her wings and rose up into the air again. Gihl-Khuan stood up with a groan and brushed the dirt from the shaft off his hopelessly stained robe.

“The Positronic was broken,” he replied soberly. “I had no use for it anymore.”

Manoli suspected that this response could spark a Topsid tower’s worth of follow-up questions, but he stayed quiet. A good doctor—and even his professors wouldn’t disagree with this one—also knew when *not* to keep asking.

The small flying lizard hissed, urging them to move, and fluttered over to Khatleen-Tarr, who was still sitting in the sand and watching these events unfold with appraising looks. Kikerren nudged her head with her mouth.

“Hey,” the lizard woman protested, laughing. “What’s gotten into you?”

“She wants us to head out,” Gihl-Khuan said, stepping over to her and offering his hand to help her up. Something flickered in Khatleen-Tarr’s eyes that Manoli took as hope, though perhaps it was just the reflected light of the new morning.

The women regarded the hand, then ultimately took it.

“Head out?” Manoli looked around. Kikerren was already flying resolutely towards the mountains and didn’t look around at her companions. “But where to? There’s... There’s nothing there.”

“We go where she leads us,” Gihl-Khuan said softly, and it sounded like a homecoming. “To the Wise Ones’ Stronghold. To Sharp-Eyes.” Then he walked off, Khatleen-Tarr’s hand still in his, away from the shaft and the city.

Eric Manoli followed them.